ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

# RANCH ROMANCES

25c

Now 148 Pages

SECOND NOVEMBER NUMBER

## GOOD-BYE TO PARADISE

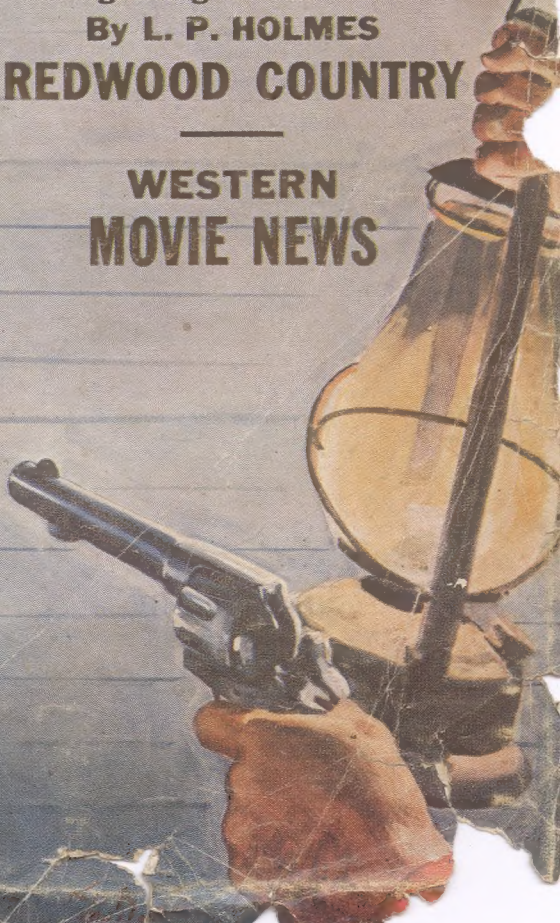
By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

*Beginning a new serial*

By L. P. HOLMES

## REDWOOD COUNTRY

## WESTERN MOVIE NEWS



# MIRACLE MEDICAL DISCOVERY BY FAMOUS SKIN DOCTOR GROWS HAIR ON BALD HEADS

**Now! Medical scalp and hair specialist's KEMPOR formula actually can regrow new hair by carrying fresh, vital nourishment deep into starved hair roots!**

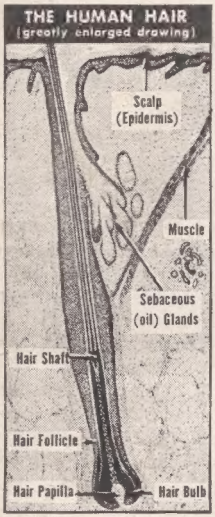
**90% of all cases of baldness can be benefitted — according to famous medical authorities**

**We do not claim we can grow hair on every bald head** but Dermatologists have computed that only about 10% of the hopeless cases of baldness are due to heredity, injuries and systemic disorders.

Some hairfall is normal. But abnormal amounts of falling hair are *nature's warning signal of approaching baldness.* Save your hair now while there is still time on our —

SATISFACTION OR MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE!

Use the formula (KEMPOR) that has been the noted skin doctor's closely guarded secret — tested and proved in his private practice!




**Used successfully in his private practice on patients in all walks of life—now, for the first time this doctor's amazing formula is available for home use!**

**CLINICALLY TESTED AND PROVED — GUARANTEED ABSOLUTELY SAFE AND HARMLESS! Formula Used by Many Doctors Themselves!**

## At Last! A Way to End the Curse of Baldness!

Do you suffer the shame and embarrassment of excessive falling hair, bald spots, dandruff scales, itchy scalp? Is premature baldness making you look old before your time, robbing you of your rightful share of life and love? Does your bald head make you look too old for that better job, that bigger pay check?

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No sticky grease—no muss or fuss! So easy and simple to use—takes just a minute or two a day! Guaranteed absolutely safe—even for youngsters! This revolutionary scientific formula, KEMPOR, is absolutely different and unlike any other hair and scalp product on the market.

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**Here are just a few of the actual case histories in the files of the noted skin doctor, discoverer of the KEMPOR Formula.**

(NOTE: Since these cases were taken from the Doctor's private files, actual names have not been used, and pictures of professional models have been substituted to assure privacy to actual patients described.)

**CASE 645 Physician, 45**
**Symptoms:** Dry, irritated scalp. Excessive hair loss.
**Result:** "Excessive hair loss ceased entirely. *New hair growth replaced those which were formerly lost.*"

**CASE 847 Housewife, 42**
**Symptoms:** Considerable loss of hair *following permanent.* Hair came out in handfuls.
**Result:** *Hair loss ceased. A complete regrowth of hair occurred later!*

**CASE 1206 Druggist, 26**
**Symptoms:** *"Hereditary" premature baldness. Father largely bald at 25 years of age.*
**Result:** Scalp and hair clean. *No further unnatural hair loss since start of treatment.*

**ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES!**

Only KEMPOR is the perfected formula of the famous scalp and hair doctor who made this revolutionary scientific discovery!

## FREE 14-DAY TRIAL OFFER
### MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

Use the **KEMPOR** Formula for just 14 days, according to simple directions enclosed with package. If, at the end of 14 days you are not completely satisfied that **KEMPOR** is everything, does everything we claim—return the unused portion—*and your full purchase price will be refunded!* You are the sole judge!

**Guardian Pharmacal Corporation**

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Gentlemen: In plain wrapper please send me month's supply of KEMPOR Formula with simple directions for use. On delivery I will pay postman $5.00, plus C.O.D. charge (enclose money order, cash or check and we will pay all shipping costs).

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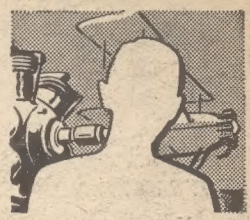
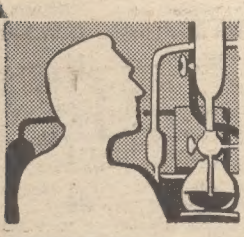
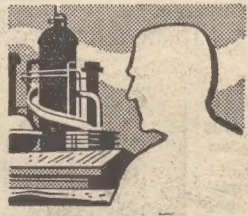


DESIGNER of a famous aircraft engine.



CHEMICAL director of nationally known research laboratory.

ENGINEER in charge of a famous company's engineering laboratory.



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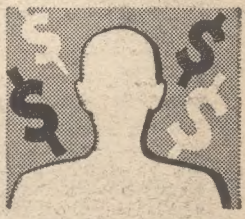

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*SECOND NOVEMBER NUMBER*

November 23, 1951
Volume 168, Number 4

# RANCH ROMANCES

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*ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY*


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FANNY ELLSWORTH
*Editor*

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"While learning, made $5 to $10 a week in spare time. Now have a profitable spare time shop." — L. ARNOLD, Pontiac, Mich.

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"Have my own shop. Am authorized serviceman for five manufacturers and do servicing for 7 dealers."—P. MILLER, Maumee, O.

"Four years ago, a bookkeeper on a hand-to-mouth salary, am now a Radio Engineer ABC network."—N. H. WARD, Ridgefield Park, New Jersey.

"When I enrolled, had no idea it would be so easy to learn. Have equipped my shop out of spare time earnings. I am clearing about $40 to $60 a month." J. D. KNIGHT, Denison, Tex.

## I Will Train You at Home with MANY KITS OF PARTS I SEND

Do you want good pay, a job with a bright future and security? Would you like a profitable shop of your own? The fast growing, prosperous RADIO-TELEVISION industry is making these opportunities for you. Radio alone is bigger than ever. 90 million home and auto Radios, 3100 Broadcasting Stations, expanding use of Aviation and Police Radio, Micro-Wave Relay, Two-Way Radio for buses, taxis, etc., are making opportunities for Servicing and Communications Technicians and FCC-Licensed Operators.

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In 1946 only 6,000 TV sets sold. In 1950 over 5,000,000. By 1954, 25,000,000 TV sets will be in use, according to estimates. Over 100 TV Stations are operating in 35 states. Authorities predict there will be 1,000 TV Stations. This means new jobs, more jobs, good pay for qualified men.

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Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE experimenting with circuits common to Radio and Television. Many students make $5, $10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. Special Booklets start teaching you the day you enroll.

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ADDRESS.....

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### Rarin' to Go

Dear Editor:

I'm hoping for a full mail-box. I'm a Rhode Island girl, but I've traveled all over the U.S. and I especially love Dixieland and California. I'm a writer and a poet. My other hobbies are collecting novelty salt'n peppers, and I have 2000 sets, every one different! I love songs. We set poems to music and our piano is always tinkling. I'm hoping people of similar interests will write . . . pronto—to a girl who's fulla pep and rarin' to go! Come on, sports.

MURIEL E. EDDY

125 Pearl Street
Providence 7, Rhode Island

### Telephone Operator

Dear Editor:

How about a girl from West Virginia crashing in on OUR AIR MAIL! I work as a telephone operator here in St. Albans, and I just love it. I have two days off a week and therefore I have lots of time to answer any letters I receive. I am 24 years old, stand 5'5" tall and have dark hair and eyes. I like all sports and I love to cook and sew! So come on everyone, fill my mail-box right up to the top. I'll be glad to exchange snap shots.

CECILINE LILLY

St. Albans, West Virginia

### Sincere Young Miss

Dear Editor:

I hope I will get this letter printed in OUR AIR MAIL section of your wonderful magazine. I am sincerely interested in writing to boys and girls from 15-20 years of age. I will be 16 soon. I have long red hair and green eyes, weigh about 100 lbs., height 5'3". I like horseback riding, movies, dancing, writing and receiving letters, sewing and reading. I'll be waiting for your letters, so get busy. I'll try to answer them all.

JOYCE INSALL

Rt. #3 Box 103
Belton, Texas

### High School Junior

Dear Editor:

Do I have a chance to get my letter published in RANCH ROMANCES? I hope I'm not disappointed. I am 15 years old, have blond hair, gray eyes and stand 5'2" tall. I am a junior in high school. I promise to answer all letters I receive. So come on, everyone, how's about dropping me a line?

JO ANN BARKER

Keokee, Va.

### Likes Horses

Dear Editor:

I am a young high school girl, 16 years old. I am 5'2½" tall and weigh 120 lbs. I have dark brown hair and blue eyes. My hobby is writing letters and riding horses. I am also interested in all sports. I would like to hear from fellows and girls from all over the world. I will exchange snaps.

KATHY NADEAU

5803 N.E. Shaver
Portland 13, Ore.

**EDITOR'S NOTE: For 26 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.**

**Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.**

### Has Traveled

Dear Editor:

I hope this doesn't reach the waste-basket. I am a girl from Pennsylvania who wants some pen-pals. I am 25 years old. I am 4'11½" tall; weigh 115 lbs.; have brown hair and green eyes. I am just an average American girl. I did some traveling and now being lonely and at home I am searching for friends through OUR AIR MAIL. I love writing long letters and hope my mail box will be full so I can fill my leisure hours. Won't you please answer my plea and help me out?

CAROLINE HANEY

R.D. #2 Box 89A
Bridgeville, Pa.

### Army Man

Dear Editor:

I am a young man in the Regular Army. I am 21 years old, stand 5'8" tall, weigh 154 lbs., have brown hair and eyes. Sometimes when I don't receive letters from home and some of the other soldiers do, I feel very lonesome. It doesn't take long to dash off a line or two, and I promise everybody who writes to me will get an answer.

CPL. ADULFO M. MUNOZ, JR.
RA 18319656, 6014 ASU. Med. Det.
U.S. Army Hospital, Camp Cooke, Calif.

### Musically Inclined

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping our letter gets published. We are two girls who live in a small town where there isn't much recreation. We are both 16, and both of us have golden brown hair and gray eyes. We have quite a few hobbies, among them are dancing, singing, and playing the piano, and we also

enjoy most sports. We are interested in mail from anyone, anywhere.

EVELYN MALBERG
WANDA MASON

Sunburst, Mont.

### Will Exchange Snaps

Dear Editor:

Have I any chance of having my plea for pen pals published in OUR AIR MAIL? I am 22 years old, have blonde hair, blue eyes and weigh 112 lbs. My height is 5'2" tall. I like movies, sports and western and popular music. I will exchange snaps with anyone and I promise to answer all letters I receive. I would like to hear from guys and gals about my age. I was married but am now separated from my husband and have three lovely children, two boys and one girl.

PHYLLIS MEYETTE

Box 16
Canaan Center, N.H.

### Second Attempt

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to get into OUR AIR MAIL. I am 17 years old, weigh 119 lbs., and stand 5'4" tall. I have light brown hair and green eyes. I like books, music, hiking, swimming and writing and receiving letters. I promise to answer every letter I receive.

ONA LON HUFF

R. 5, Box 2189
Oronille, Calif.

### How's About Writing?

Dear Editor:

I am writing to OUR AIR MAIL in the hope that I will get a lot of pen pals. I read RANCH ROMANCES and enjoy it a lot. I am 15 years old. I have dark brown hair, blue eyes, weigh 110 lbs., and stand 5'3" tall. I like all sports and I enjoy singing. So come on, everybody, write.

GLENNA WOOLDRIDGE

R. 1, Box 128
Elliston, Va.

### Enjoys Basket Ball

Dear Editor:

I hope my plea for pen pals is printed in OUR AIR MAIL. I am 13 years old, 5'1" tall and weigh 85 lbs. My hobbies are skating, swimming, horseback riding and playing basket ball. I promise to answer all letters, so don't disappoint me.

AGATHA BELLE WHITE

R.R. #1
Dolores, Colo.

### Wants Older People

Dear Editor:

Please print my letter in OUR AIR MAIL department. I am in my 50's and alone. I would enjoy hearing from the older people. I promise to make my letters very interesting and will answer all letters I receive.

AUGUSTA COLLINS

Box 326
Rogue River, Ore.

# Are YOU In This Picture ?

So many people think it is their fate to struggle through life, barely making ends meet, and having discontent and turmoil surround their every effort. You are possibly one of these.

But right here and now we want to say to you that THESE CONDITIONS ARE NOT PART OF YOUR NATURAL HERITAGE! Do you think that SUCCESS, PEACE, and MATERIAL ABUNDANCE are only for the other fellow—not you? Don't you think you have the opportunity to CHOOSE WHICH PATH WILL LEAD YOU TO OVERCOMING VICTORY?

If you think for one minute that you are doomed to disappointment the rest of your life, GET RID OF THESE THOUGHTS, FOR SUCH NEED NOT BE THE CASE! For if you mean business, and are willing to accept that which you should have, we have a wonderful message for you!

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Dept. TF 10-51
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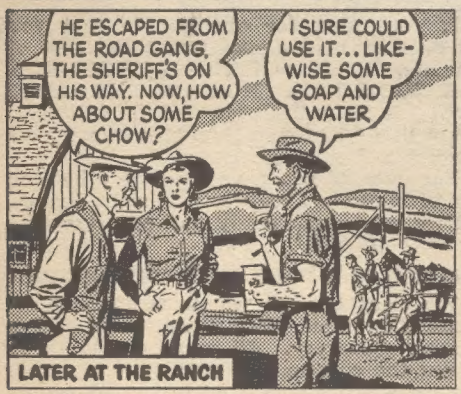
Address .....

City..... State.....

# CHUCK HEARD A SCREAM AND THEN...

HOPELESSLY LOST IN THE RUGGED CANYON COUNTRY, DIANE BLAIR WISHES SHE'D TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY THE "DUDE RANCH" RULES AGAINST RIDING ALONE... AND THEN...

ECHOING UP A NEARBY DRAW, HER CRY REACHES A YOUNG GEOLOGIST


HE ESCAPED FROM THE ROAD GANG. THE SHERIFF'S ON HIS WAY. NOW, HOW ABOUT SOME CHOW?
I SURE COULD USE IT... LIKE-WISE SOME SOAP AND WATER
LATER AT THE RANCH

WHEN IT COMES TO SHAVING QUICKLY AND EASILY AT A SAVING, YOU CAN'T BEAT THIN GILLETTES. THEY FAR OUTSELL ALL OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES BECAUSE THEY'RE KEENER AND LAST LONGER. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, SO THEY NEVER NICK OR SCRAPE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

# TRAIL DUST

**THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.**

A COUPLE OF safecrackers down in Texas were not completely frustrated in their attempt to open an ice cream parlor's safe one hot summer night. Though they couldn't open the safe, they got something for their efforts—three pints of nice cold ice cream.

**A COCKER SPANIEL helped out the Navy down in Hastings, Nebr. This dog, trained to roll over upon mention of the word "dead," came through with flying colors when some sailors were out to annoy a few Marines. The tars asked the dog which he'd rather be—a Marine, or dead. The spaniel promptly lay down and rolled over.**

THE LOS ANGELES county board of supervisors defeated a proposed law which would make fan dancers required to carry identification at all times. As the supervisor who led the opposition so aptly put it, "Where?"

**UP IN PORTLAND, ORE., a cat is now on the city payroll. Once a charity case, depending on catch-as-catch-can handouts, Kitty now works for the city, killing rats at the city incinerator. The new refuse disposal superintendent thought it was a shame for Kitty to have to live on charity, so he saw to it that the City Commissioner approved a $5 monthly expenditure for her food.**

IN VANCOUVER, CANADA, a detective sure disproved the old idea that experience is the best teacher. While he was in the courtroom testifying against a thief—who incidentally was convicted—another thief stole his overcoat from the court lobby.

**WHAT MIGHT HAVE been a simple thing turned into a big controversy in one town. When the farmers made a survey to find out which way pigs' tails curl, they were much surprised to receive such varying results. Believe it or not, 16⅔ per cent were counter-clockwise, 50 per cent were clockwise—and a third of the unpredictable animals had tails that managed to curl both ways.**

THEY FINALLY FOUND the defendant in a drunken driving case in Albuquerque, N. M. He was right across the hall from the room he was to be tried in—serving, believe it or not, on a jury in the main courtroom.

**THERE WAS ONE very interested—but not so innocent—bystander the night police and firemen looked in the Arkansas River in Hutchinson, Kans., for the body of a man who was believed to have drowned. It seems that the man's wife and some friends couldn't find him when they made ready to leave after fishing. They found him all right—in the midst of the crowd that was watching the search. We don't know what his wife said to him, but we know what ours would say to us.**

# RANCH FLICKER TALK

# Flaming Feather

***PARAMOUNT'S latest Western has exciting settings for its story of romance—and villainy***

FORT SAVAGE, Ariz., if it ever becomes a real town, will be the strangest one in the West. No taxes, no neon signs, no law—except a badge which says "Marshall" and may be rented for a nominal fee.

At present the town is nameless. It has only one street, a few ramshackle, weather-beaten buildings and a hitching rail. It has been the scene of more gunfights, brawls, knifings and other assorted skulduggery per square foot than any place else in the country.

The "Mayor"—who owns the place—is a rancher named Otto Hallermund. He has profited rather handsomely from all this lawlessness. Movie companies pay well for picturesque settings for their Westerns, and the mayor not only rents his town, but keeps its one street so dusty that it brings extra rental for his water wagon.

The latest movie filmed there was Paramount's *Flaming Feather,* in which the town is called Fort Savage—the first of its many names that the mayor has liked.

The first day's shooting was typical of what the town has been putting up with for years. A gunfighter shoots a drifter, and rancher Sterling Hayden glances up with mild interest. Then the cavalry, led by Forrest Tucker, clatters up in a swirl of dust—on the chase for a mysterious outlaw known as the Sidewinder.

Another interesting setting used in *Flaming Feather* is a gigantic Indian cliff dwelling known as Montezuma Castle. Paramount built its own cliff dwelling for *Ace in the Hole,* but decided to use the genuine article for their new Western, though the studio had to duplicate the interior of one of the cliff dwelling apartments.

***Sterling Hayden and Barbara Rush***

***Arleen Whelan, as a dance-hall queen, makes a switch from nice-girl rôles***

Montezuma Castle is used in the climax of the movie as the refuge of the Sidewinder and his band of renegade Indians, who have abducted the heroine, Barbara Rush.

This is Barbara's fourth movie rôle, though none of her pictures had been released up to the time she was making *Flaming Feather*. "So I'm a movie actress without any fans," she said sadly.

Arleen Whelan plays a dance-hall girl, making a switch to villainy from "nice-girl rôles that bored me." Her main occupation in *Flaming Feather* is setting men to kill each other so she'll get their gold.

Carol Thurston rounds out the distaff side of the cast as an Indian maiden. Up till now Montana-born Carol has played a Javanese, Eskimo, Chinese and other exotic types.

*Flaming Feather* provides a comeback for Richard Arlen in the colorful rôle of Showdown, gunfighter and tinhorn gambler, and co-villain with Victor Jory.

Sterling Hayden and Forrest Tucker are co-heroes, and we won't tell you which one gets the girl. Forrest plays a cavalryman for the third straight time, though to his great relief he has at last become sympathetic.

Hollywood has found handsome Sterling Hayden one of the most elusive heroes in its history. Even when his career was going well, Sterling would suddenly get fed up with Hollywood and sail off for parts unknown on his schooner. But now, says Sterling, he's turned over a new leaf, and will stay strictly available for movie rôles.

We forgot one feminine member of the cast—and you'd better look quick if you want to see her. She's Mrs. Sterling Hayden, known as Betty. In one of the town sequences she made her movie debut and found the experience so harrowing that she retired permanently from the screen.

***BETH BRIGHT***

Warner Bros.

*Ruth Roman—from modeling, hatchecking, selling, to stardom*

# RUTH ROMAN
# Determined Lady

WE DON'T for a minute claim that Ruth Roman is a Western star. She's made some Westerns and we're sure she'll make more, but she's the kind of rising young star who will never be typed.

Ruth, herself, won't even admit she's a star. "Being a real star means more than getting star billing," she says. "It's something that takes years of work and good performances to achieve."

Ruth was born in Boston, and her father was owner of and barker for a carnival sideshow, until he died a few years after Ruth was born. Her mother tried to run the show without him, but the job was too much for her, so she sold it and barely made ends meet until her three daughters were grown.

Ruth always wanted to be an actress. She acted in school plays, at the neighborhood settlement house, wherever there was a part and an audience. She won a scholarship to a dramatic school, and in the summer played the straw-hat circuit.

When Ruth headed for Broadway, she knew it would be tough, but she knew persistence would get her a part. She was wrong. Her jobs included modeling, hat-checking, selling, but no acting.

One of the friends she shared her sandwiches and cokes with in those days was Steve Cochran. Then they shared their dreams; now they're sharing star billing in *Tomorrow Is Another Day.*

But that was a long way ahead. When Ruth finally became convinced that Broadway's cold shoulder wouldn't warm up, she headed for Hollywood with $100 and the same determined ambition that had brought her to New York. Steve's path crossed Ruth's again on her first day there. In fact, their footprints crossed as they discovered each other trying out their feet in the concrete indentations of famous feet at Grauman's Chinese Theater.

Ruth got a room at a boardinghouse full of young hopefuls, which has since become known as the "House of the Seven Garbos." And at last she got a job. It was not quite what she'd had in mind when she'd studied Juliet and Camille, but Ruth wasn't fussy. She played Lothel, Queen of the Jungle, through 15 chapters of a Universal serial.

This took less time than you might think, and Ruth was pounding the pavements again. She tested for David Selznick and was given a contract, and then got paid for doing nothing.

Ruth is in business to act, so she begged for a release and finally got it. Her next part was a bit in *Good Sam* with Gary Cooper. Two years later she starred with Coop in *Dallas.*

"I wish I'd known what was coming then," sighs Ruth. "I was getting pretty discouraged."

But soon afterwards, things began to improve. Her first good part was in *The Window.* Then she played in *Champion,* and then she was cast in pictures as fast as she could make them. Now she's under long term contract to Warner Bros.

Last December Ruth was married to Mortimer Hall, "who's in radio, not movies," says Ruth, "and I'm glad of that."

Things look bright for Ruth, but she's still prepared for adversity.

"When I was little," she says, "a carny man taught me how to throw knives. I've never had to yet, but it's my ace in the hole."

*Janey cried, "Ed, Ed, are you hurt?"*

# TO PARADISE

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

IT HAD often occurred to Ed Allen that if a man could sell scenery, old Mike Thorn would be the richest cowman in the Rockies. The strange part of it was that the things a cattleman usually considered, such as grass and water and winter shelter, had nothing to do with Mike picking Paradise Valley when he had started the MT twenty years ago.

The way Ed heard the story, Mike had fallen in love with a Denver girl who liked to look at the mountains. Mike was past forty at the time and he'd seen most of the West. After he was married he brought his bride and small herd to Paradise Valley for just one reason—the high peaks that rose sharply above the western end of the valley made a fairyland scene that his young wife loved. Then a malicious fate had decreed death for her when their girl Janey was still a child.

To Ed's way of thinking, it was a piece of foolishness to run cattle in Paradise Valley. Mike had wasted a big chunk of his life trying to make a living up here in the high country when he could have settled in the plains where he wouldn't be bucking snow all through winter as deep as a calf's back.

Now, heading down the creek to Tail Holt with Mike and Janey, Ed knew what Mike would do when they reached the east end of the valley. It had happened every time they'd made this ride and it happened now.

Without a word Mike reined up and hipped around in the saddle, eyes on the high granite peaks with their scattered patches of snow that had survived the summer sun.

Ed glanced at Janey, impatience prodding him, for this was a ceremonial he did not understand and he doubted that Janey did. She must have sensed how her father felt though, for she never tried to hurry him. To Ed it was a criminal waste of time, and now it struck him that Mike was trying to see the mountains for his wife who lay up there on the ridge above the MT ranch house. As far as Ed was con-

*WHAT MYSTERIOUS PURPOSE brought the three gunslicks to a peaceful valley, threatening life, liberty and romance?*

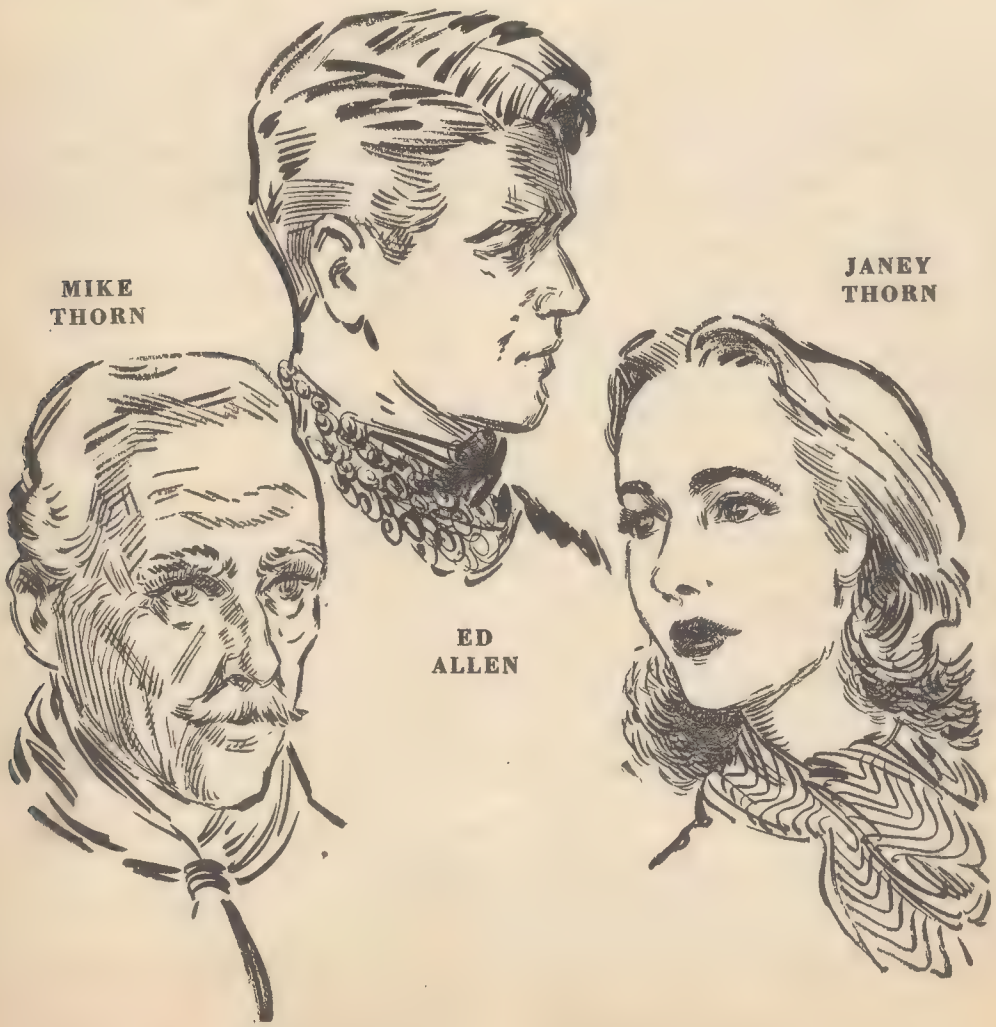
cerned, that was just stupid sentimentality.

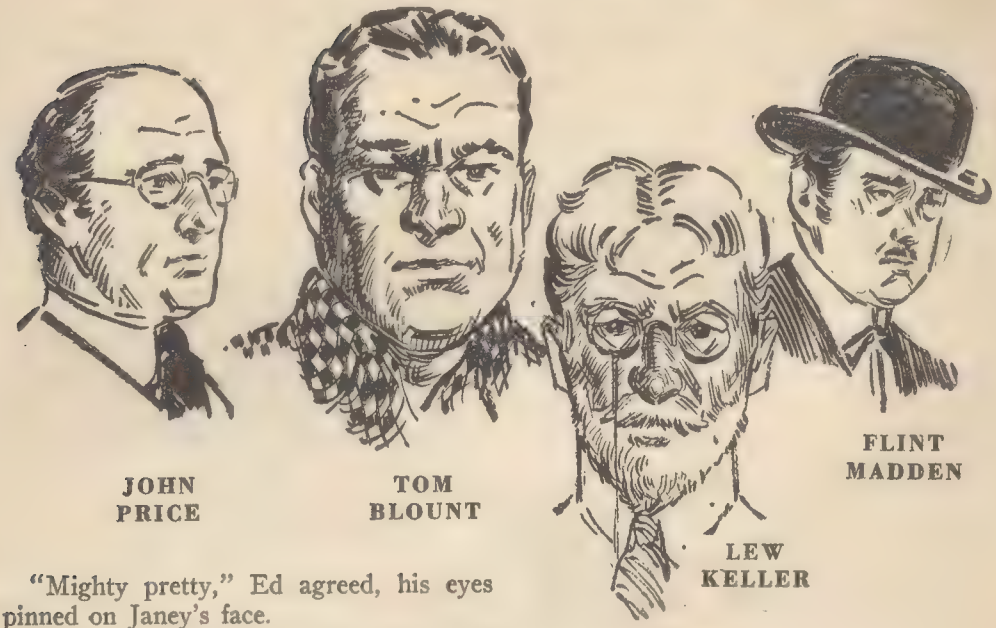
"You know," Mike murmured as if talking to himself, "it seems like the aspens have a little more color every fall than they had the year before."

Ed stirred in his saddle, glancing again at Janey who was watching her father. In Ed's eyes Janey was a sight prettier than any chunk of mountains the Lord had rigged up. She was wearing a leather jacket and a tan riding skirt; her Stetson dangled down her back from the chin strap and the morning sun touched her auburn hair with its scarlet hue. Ed could look at her all day and never quite satisfy the hunger he had for her.

MIKE filled his pipe, eyes still on the mountains that lifted sharply above the west end of the valley. He wasn't in any hurry and he should be. He just couldn't get it through his head that he was flat broke and that Lew Keller, the Tail Holt banker, wouldn't loan him another nickel. He'd miss the stage to Denver if he insisted on keeping his saddle warm while he looked at the scenery, and the only chance he had to save the MT was to make some kind of a deal for the steers they'd rounded up and driven down from the high range.

"Mighty pretty, ain't it?" Mike asked, firing his pipe.






"Mighty pretty," Ed agreed, his eyes pinned on Janey's face.

Irritated, she glanced at Ed and turned her head away, her rich full lips holding no hint of the smile that usually lingered there. She opened her mouth and closed it without saying anything. She'd let him have it right between the eyes later when they were alone.

"Why can't you ever think of anything but cows and horses and money?" she'd ask in a voice that would take the hide right off his back. "There are some other things in life, you know."

And he'd say, "Sure. Sentiment. Your dad's got a streak of it a yard wide down his back, and what's it ever got him but twenty years of hard work and living on the rocky edge of nothing?"

There was no telling what would be said after that. But for all their arguing, Ed never forgot one thing. If it wasn't for Janey, he would have been on his way a long time ago. Mike owed him three month's wages, and there was about as much chance of getting it as there was talking Lew Keller into making a new loan.

Mike needed him, for he was a top hand and he'd done two men's work from the day he'd signed on with Mike more than a year ago. But it wasn't Mike's need that held Ed. It was his love for Janey and the hope that someday she'd love him, and all the time the knowledge plagued him that actually he was just as sentimental as Mike, or he wouldn't be hoping for a miracle like that.

Mike had his pipe going now and he swung his black down the trail, Janey behind him, Ed eating dust in the rear.

Before they had dropped fifty feet down the steep slope, the ridge line behind them had blotted out the view of the snow peaks. Ed could hear Paradise Creek chattering off to his right as it boiled down the side of the mountain. The air was filled with the smell of dust and the pines, dry, motionless air that now, in mid-morning, was still crisp with the promise of an early winter.

If they were going to move the steers from the valley to East Park, it should be done before the first big snow. But Mike was in no hurry. He was a dawdler and a dreamer, Ed thought with growing irritation, and by the time he made a deal for the herd, they'd have the snow and it would be a hell of a tough job moving the cattle.

The real tragedy lay in the simple fact that Mike was licked. The hard times that had hit the whole country had knocked the bottom out of the price of beef. It was doubtful if Mike could sell the steers for enough to meet Lew Keller's interest, let

alone pay Ed's wages and lay in a winter's supply of grub.

They reached the foot of the grade an hour later. East Park lay before them, its tawny, grass-covered floor sweeping out for miles on all sides of Tail Holt. The town was not far to the east, a huddle of frame and log buildings that showed the pinch of the times. Most of the business buildings were vacant, the windows boarded up, the grass had grown up along the edges of the street.

ED brought his buckskin up beside Janey's grey mare, thinking about the quarrel they'd had the evening before. It had stemmed from the same thing. Ed had told her there was no sense in hanging on to the MT. They'd do better to lease a piece of East Park from Lew Keller and move the MT cattle down to the lower altitude. She wouldn't listen. She wouldn't even talk to Mike, and she was the only one who could make the old man see where he was headed.

Janey's dark blue eyes met Ed's grey ones, but she didn't smile and her eyes didn't soften. She asked, her voice cool, "You quitting if Dad can't raise the money to pay what you've got coming?"

"It would serve you right if I did," he said angrily. "If there ever was a bullheaded family who couldn't see no farther than the end of their noses—"

"It's the Thorns," she finished for him. "Well, Mr. Allen, we're what we are and you can take us or leave us."

"I'll take you, I reckon," he said, "and I ain't leaving. You ought to know me by now."

She gave him another straight look, her head high, little chin thrust defiantly at him. "Sometimes I don't think I know you at all, Ed."

"And what you do know, you don't like."

"I didn't say that," she murmured, head cocked thoughtfully as if wondering whether she did or not. "It seems to me there are two kinds of people, the ones who hang on and fight, and the ones who drift. I get the notion you're a drifter."

There wasn't much he could say to that. She was right as far as his past was concerned. He had worked for Mike longer than he had worked for any other man, and every time he had a fight with Janey he told himself he was the biggest fool who ever sat a saddle, or he'd be on his way again. But fool or not, he'd stick. No other woman had ever attracted him the way Janey had. He was done drifting, but he hadn't been able to convince Janey of it.

Mike had drawn ahead of them. As they rode into town, he looked back, sensing that they were quarreling again and not liking it. Mike was a man who never quarreled with anybody, not even Tom Blount, his belligerent neighbor who owned the Rocking C across the creek from the MT.

"Going into the bank with me, Ed?" Mike asked.

"Sure, I'll go."

"I'm surprised," Janey said softly. "Last night you were telling me it was a waste of time to see Keller."

"You know what's the mater with you?"

"You've told me enough times," Janey said. "I'm spoiled."

"That's right. Mike's too easy with you. If he'd warmed the seat of your pants a few times—"

"Maybe you'd like to try it?" she challenged.

"I get an itchy palm sometimes," he said.

She laughed unexpectedly, her face softening. "You'd better save your spankings for your kids if you ever stay in one place long enough to have any."

"Our kids," he said.

The laughter fled from her face. She was that way, her mood as changeable as the weather in Paradise Valley.

Furious, she cried, "Yours, but not mine!" and reined her bay across the street to the Mercantile.

Mike stepped down in front of the bank, staring at Janey. As Ed dismounted and tied, the old man asked, "What's biting her this time?"

"She's mad at me again."

Mike stepped up on the boardwalk. "I'm sorry, Ed. I've sure been hoping you two could hit it off."

"Guess I'm wasting my time," Ed said.

"You never know." Mike pulled his pipe from his pocket and filled it, face softened again by the memories. "I sparked her mother for a year and thought I wasn't getting anywhere, then one day I kissed her. I guess she kind of liked it. Anyhow, she said yes and I fetched her up here and everything was fine."

Ed wasn't listening. He saw the two Rocking C horses racked in front of the Lone Star Saloon. That meant Tom Blount and his hand Laredo were in town. A settlement with Blount was long overdue. Ed had spent half the summer pushing Rocking C cows and calves back across the creek, and the last time he'd told Blount that if it happened again, he wouldn't do any more pushing. He'd hold Blount's cattle and it would take some cash to get them back.

Mike hadn't liked it. That was another case of his being too easygoing. He got along with folks even if his rights were abused, but that wasn't Ed's way.

Mike turned toward the bank, saying, "Looks like the stage has gone. I'll catch it tomorrow."

"Wait," Ed said. "Blount's in town."

Mike paused, frowning. He said, "No trouble, Ed."

"That depends on Blount. Looks like we'll be finding out."

BLOUNT must have seen them ride in. He came out of the Lone Star now, Laredo at his heels. Blount was a stocky, red-faced man who had bought the Rocking C about the time Ed had drifted into the country and signed on with Mike. Laredo had been with him then.

Now they moved along the boardwalk, Blount calling, "I want to talk to you, Thorn."

"Stay out of this, Ed," Mike breathed.

Ed said nothing, his eyes on Laredo. The fellow was as dangerous as a rattler in a man's blankets. He was a slender man, about forty, Ed judged, with white hair and a face as brown as ancient leather. He had the palest blue eyes Ed had ever seen. He wore his gun low and tied down the way a professional gunslinger did.

It had always struck Ed as being queer, Laredo's nursing cows for thirty a month and beans. Ed had seen enough gunslicks to know they didn't cotton to hard work, and it would not be difficult for Laredo to find someone who was in enough trouble to pay him fighting wages.

"I've got a proposition," Blount said as he came up. "The street ain't no place to talk. Come into the Lone Star and we'll have a drink."

"We'll talk here," Ed said.

"Thank you kindly, Tom," Mike said courteously, "but I was just going into the bank."

Blount pinned coal-black eyes on Ed, making no effort to hide his hostility. Not long ago he had asked Janey to marry him and been turned down, a blow to his vanity that had made him more overbearing and sullen than usual, and he seemed to blame Ed for it.

Now he folded his heavy-muscled arms across the front of his sweat-stained shirt, Laredo lingering at his side like a thin shadow.

"One of these days," Blount said, "I'm going to make this country too hot to hold you."

"This is a good day," Ed murmured. "Heat it up some. I'm kind of cool right now."

"The sign ain't right yet." Blount turned his eyes to Mike. "Fixing to ask Keller for a loan?"

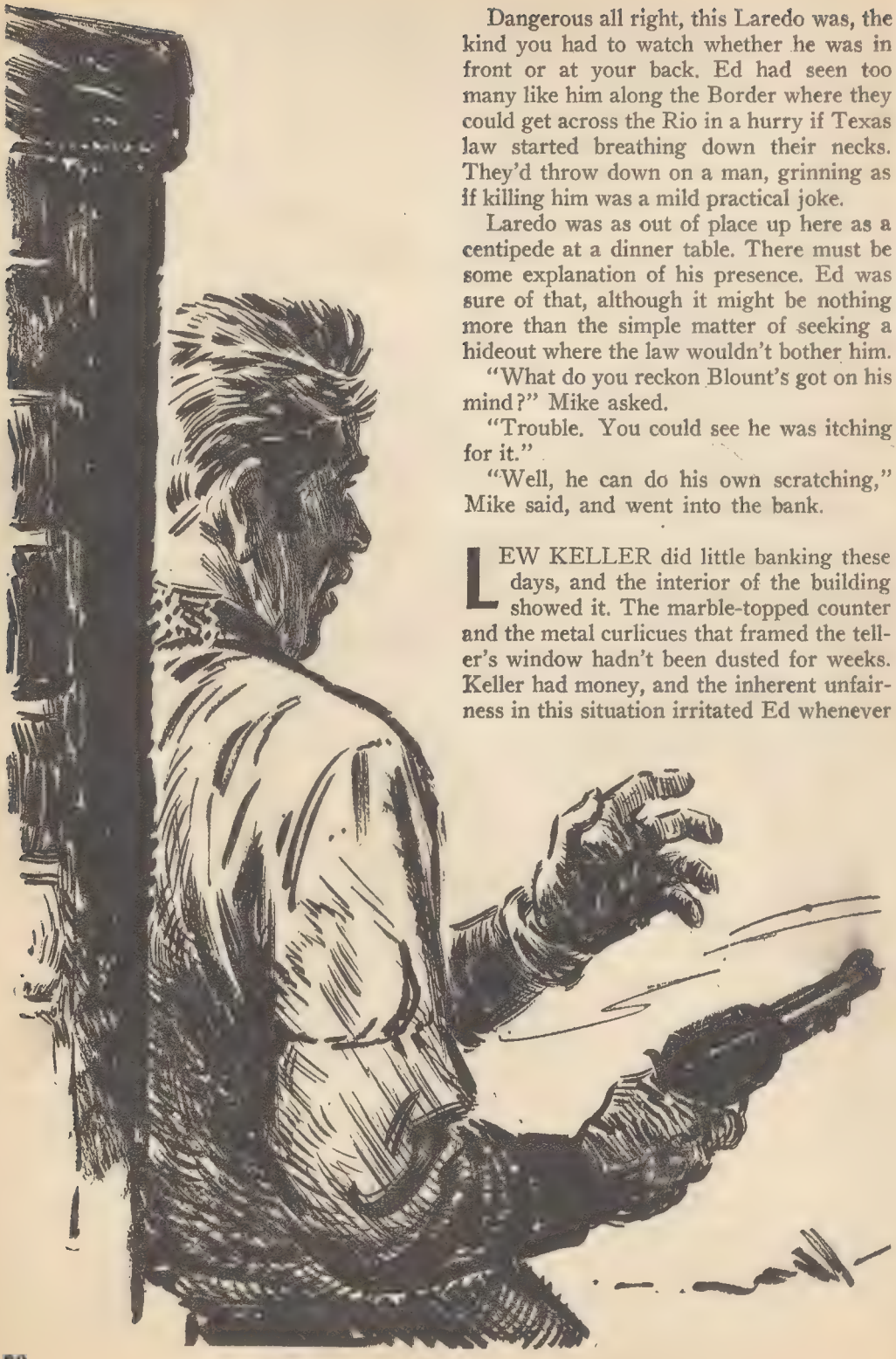
"I consider that my business," Mike said, still courteous.

"Maybe it's our business. Paradise Valley ain't good cattle country, which same I found out after buying the Rocking C. Or maybe I oughta say it ain't good enough to keep two outfits going. We're both broke and that old goat of a banker don't figure we're good for a loan."

"I'll find out for myself," Mike said.

"Go ahead. I'll be in the Lone Star. Come in for that drink before you leave town."

Wheeling, Blount lumbered back along the walk and went into the saloon, Laredo moving beside him with graceful, cat-like strides.



Dangerous all right, this Laredo was, the kind you had to watch whether he was in front or at your back. Ed had seen too many like him along the Border where they could get across the Rio in a hurry if Texas law started breathing down their necks. They'd throw down on a man, grinning as if killing him was a mild practical joke.

Laredo was as out of place up here as a centipede at a dinner table. There must be some explanation of his presence. Ed was sure of that, although it might be nothing more than the simple matter of seeking a hideout where the law wouldn't bother him.

"What do you reckon Blount's got on his mind?" Mike asked.

"Trouble. You could see he was itching for it."

"Well, he can do his own scratching," Mike said, and went into the bank.

LEW KELLER did little banking these days, and the interior of the building showed it. The marble-topped counter and the metal curlicues that framed the teller's window hadn't been dusted for weeks. Keller had money, and the inherent unfairness in this situation irritated Ed whenever

*He felt the dead man's body give, and then his own gun was talking*

he thought about it. All Keller had to do was to sit through another year of hard times and half the ranches in the country would fall into his lap like ripe plums from a limb overhead.

Keller always made a pretense of keeping busy when someone came in. Now he continued writing at his desk, pen scratching noisily. Ed said, "If I kick him in the teeth, Mike, he'll know he's got company."

"We're in no hurry," Mike said.

Keller laid down his pen. He was an older man than Mike, with a face as wrinkled as a year-old potato and a white, goat-like beard that gave him a faintly comical look. In spite of his black broadcloth suit, white shirt and the over-long cigar which he constantly kept between his teeth, he never achieved the dignity which he seemed to feel a banker should possess.

"Morning, Mike," Keller said cordially, ignoring Ed. "What brings you down from Paradise?"

"Money," Mike said. "I'm asking for another loan. I owe Ed three months' wages and with winter coming on, I need supplies. We've rounded up two hundred head of prime steers, but I was hoping I wouldn't have to sell 'em, prices being what they are."

"I'd like to help you out," Keller said, "but hard times hit bankers as well as cowmen. With this fellow Teddy in the White House and the government throwing away money for national forests and parks and such, our country has come to a sorry pass."

"I wouldn't need much," Mike urged. "The price of beef's bound to come up. Can't go no other way. I'd get back on my feet if I had a little time."

Keller rose and came to the counter. Even Ed, prejudiced against bankers as he was, could not doubt the genuine sympathy that Keller felt.

"Mike, you and me have been in this country for a long time," Keller said. "We've seen the market go up and down, we've seen good winters and bad ones. But there's one thing we're sure of. Paradise isn't good cattle country."

"Maybe you'd lease some East Park grass," Ed said. "Then we could move out of Paradise."

"We?" Keller's brows lifted. He chewed thoughtfully on his cigar, finger tips tapping lightly on the marble counter top. "I could do that, Mike. Anchor range is open. Old Biddy McKay pulled out last week. I can't let you have any bank money, but I'll stake you to a personal loan just to get you through the winter."

ED FELT Mike stiffen beside him. Glancing at the old man, he saw the bleak, stubborn expression crawl across his craggy face. "No," Mike said. "I'll hang on till I'm finished."

Keller lowered his eyes. He said apologetically, "You know I never considered Paradise a good bet for a bank loan. I wouldn't have advanced you a nickel on the MT if anybody but you had owned it."

Keller paused, clearing his throat. Ed said, "What are you driving at?"

"Well, the bank has to stay solvent or a lot of folks would be ruined. I've been a little worried about your mortgage, times being like they are, so I sold your paper. I had too good an offer to turn down."

Mike gripped the marble counter, his knuckles white. "Who to, Lew?"

"Tom Blount."

It took a moment for the significance of this to strike Ed, then he started around the counter. "You damned, nickel-nursing son—"

"Ed," Mike shouted. "You ain't helping nobody that way."

"You're the kind of hombre who figures he can settle everything with his fists, ain't you?" Keller asked scornfully. "You ought to try running a bank."

Ed stopped. If he used his fists on anybody, it had better be on Blount.

He said hoarsely, "If you're willing to loan Mike enough to get him started down here, you ought to be willing to get him out of this mess, knowing what Blount will do."

"No," Keller said. "I won't loan Mike a penny if he stays in the valley."

Turning, Mike walked out of the bank. Ed breathed, "Keller, do you know what this will do to him and Janey?"

Keller hestitated, pulling at his beard. Then he said, "You're a good cowhand, Allen. You've been in the valley long enough to know what Mike's up against. Convince him he's got to leave the valley. He'd be better off if he walked away from the MT and left it setting there."

"Nobody could convince him of that," Ed said, and followed Mike into the street.

Mike was standing on the boardwalk, his head tipped back. Tail Holt was set so close to the pine-covered foothills that the ridge line hid most of the Continental Divide. Mike could see only a few scattered tips of the horny peaks that were so spectacular from Paradise Valley, but there was a small smile on his lips as if he was mentally picturing the scene he had lived with for so long.

"Funny how life deals off the bottom of the deck once in a while," Mike murmured. "Janey's mother used to say that when things got so dark you couldn't see your way, the sun was due to come up and it'd all work out. She called it faith, and she had a lot of it. I guess that's one thing I'm a little short on."

Ed didn't say anything. There was nothing he could say to that kind of talk. Janey often accused him of being hard. Well, maybe he was. He was twenty-five and he'd made his own way since he was a fuzz-faced kid. Being soft had never got him anywhere, and he didn't have faith in anything except solid, sensible things like his horse and his gun and his good right arm.

Now, staring at Mike's face, gentle and mild even at a time like this, Ed began to doubt his own standards. Ed had never seen Mike lose his temper, and he had a dozen little ways of showing his love for Janey. He'd had only a few years with his wife, but they must have been the finest years a man could have. Ed had never known anything like them, and now he wondered if there was something missing in him, something which Janey sensed.

Mike filled his pipe, glancing obliquely at Ed. "You'd best be riding on, boy. I can't pay you and I sure don't expect you to work for nothing. I know I don't strike you as being very smart, hanging up there in the valley. But it's something I can't explain."

"I ain't riding nowhere," Ed said irritably. "Let's go see what Blount wants."

"We know," Mike said. "What's the use of listening to his tongue wagging?"

"There's something about this deal I can't figure," Ed said. "Don't make real good sense, him buying your mortgage from Keller. Where'd he get the money?"

"Dunno," Mike said, "and I don't much care. As long as he's got the mortgage, he'll close me out if I don't raise the interest, and I sure as hell can't."

"I'm guessing that hombre's got something up his sleeve," Ed urged. "Let's find out what it is."

Shrugging, Mike turned toward the saloon, Ed falling into step beside him. The sun was noon high in a cloudless sky, but still it failed to warm the air. If anything, it was colder now than when they had ridden into town.

Snow was not far away, Ed thought. Neither was the day when Mike Thorn would find himself with a herd and no range. Circumstances would force him to take Keller's offer of Anchor grass here in the park. It would be a sensible thing, but it would break the old man's heart. Ed felt pity stir in him.

BLOUNT and Laredo were playing poker with a stranger. It had been months since Ed had seen a newcomer in Tail Holt, and as he moved to the bar with Mike, he gave the man a searching look.

The fellow was in his middle thirties with the pale skin of one who lived indoors, probably the kind who slept through most of the daylight hours and spent his nights at a poker table. He wore a black derby cocked low on his forehead and a brown broadcloth suit that was neatly pressed. A tinhorn looking for easy pickings, Ed thought, but the man's showing up in a poverty-stricken town like Tail Holt made no sense at all.

Blount laid his cards down and rose the instant Mike stepped through the batwings.

He came to the bar, calling, "Whisky for me and Thorn."

"And for Ed," Mike said mildly.

Blount shrugged as if it didn't matter. "Sure, sure." He nodded at the barman again. "Three glasses."

The barkeep set the glasses and a bottle on the mahogany and moved away. Ed put his Stetson on the bar and ran a hand through his sandy hair. He glanced at his thin face in the mirror, covered by a week's growth of red stubble, and he shook his head. The last month had been a hard one. He had ridden himself down to the bone and hard muscle—for nothing.

Blount filled the glasses and set the bottle down. "What did Keller say?" he asked with cold malice.

"No," Mike said, and took a drink.

Blount turned the glass in his hand, his square jaw hard set. He asked, "Keller tell you he'd sold the mortgage on the MT to me?"

"He told me," Mike said.

"Ain't long till the interest is due," Blount said. "Can you raise it?"

"No."

"Didn't figure you could," Blount said with satisfaction. "Now I've got a proposition. If I play it out, I'll get your spread for nothing, but it'd take time. I want the MT now because I don't want to sell my beef with the market like it is. I'll give you a thousand dollars for your ranch, Thorn, and I want possession in a week."

"No," Mike said.

"Damn it," Blount shouted, "you couldn't ask for nothing fairer than that. If you hang on till I close you out, you won't get nothing. This way you'd have cash to operate on and I know for a fact you can lease East Park grass from Keller."

"No," Mike repeated. "Thanks for the drink."

Neither Laredo nor the stranger had moved from the poker table. Both were watching this closely. Again it occurred to Ed that there was something mysterious here, something he needed to know to make a pattern out of the facts that he had.

Too many things were queer: Blount buying the Rocking C in the first place, Laredo staying in the valley, Blount paying Keller a premium to get the bank's mortgage on the MT, this tinhorn in the black derby showing up in Tail Holt, and now Blunt offering a thousand dollars to get immediate possession of the MT.

MIKE TURNED and would have walked out if Blount hadn't jumped in front of him. He gripped Mike's shoulder with a big hand and held him there. His voice was thick and ugly when he said, "You churn-headed idiot. You'll take my offer and you'll take it now, or I'll pound some sense into your head."

Mike jerked free. "Don't lay a hand on me again, Tom. I'm telling you. Don't do it."

Blount laughed. "Warning me, are you, Thorn? Scaring me, maybe? Well, sir, I don't scare worth a damn. I'll up my price two hundred and that's the top. Now will you take it?"

"No."

The last shred of Blount's self-control snapped. He threw a fist at Mike and knocked the old man back against the bar. Ed had stayed out of it as long as he could. Now he caught Blount with a right that swiveled the big man's head half around on his neck.

"Keep Laredo out of it, Mike," Ed shouted, and then he moved in.

That first swinging blow had hurt Blount. He retreated before Ed, cursing and trying to gain the initiative, and never quite succeeding. Ed kept after him, hitting him in the face and then the body, and finally connecting with a left that knocked Blount off his feet and sent him crashing over a poker table. The table splintered under his weight and he fell into the wreckage, cards and chips cascading to the floor.

Ed knew how Blount fought. Anything went with him, and he had the advantage of weight and strength. Now he rolled and came back to his feet, his broad face a bloody mask. He drove at Ed, reaching for him, and it was Ed's turn to back up, knowing that he could not permit Blount to get his big hands on him.

They made a slow circle of the room,

Blount taunting, "You're yellow, Allen, or you'd stand and fight." Unexpectedly Ed reversed his tactics and did exactly that, swinging rights and lefts in short vicious blows that made Blount cover up. Ed, close now, got a right past the man's guard and caught him on the nose. He felt the nose flatten under his fist, and he saw the gush of blood pour down Blount's upper lip.

It was a punishing blow. Ed had the choice of going back to his running fight, or forcing it, and the wisdom of his choice depended on how badly Blount was hurt. It was a split-second decision, decided by instinct, for this was a question of survival. There was no doubt in Ed's mind what Blount would do to him if he gained the advantage, so rather than permit that, he stayed close and kept boring in.

Blount, half-crazed by pain, was throwing wild blows and Ed took some of them rather than back up. He got Blount in the stomach and heard wind gush out of him. Blount fell forward, gripping Ed with both hands and he brought a knee up. Turning, Ed caught it on his thigh. He swung again and nailed Blount on the side of the head, but the blow was too high to be effective. Blount rammed his head upward, butting Ed under the chin.

Stars leaped across Ed's vision and exploded. He fell, Blount on top of him. Across the vast space Ed heard Mike's shout, "Get away from him, Ed, get away!" He hammered Blount on the ear; he felt the big hands relax and he arched his back and rolled the man's great weight off him. He regained his feet, jumping back as Blount grabbed for an ankle and missed.

ED STOOD motionless for a moment while he labored for breath. He brought a sleeve across his face. It came away wet with sweat and blood. Slowly Blount raised himself to his hands and knees and shook his head to clear his vision, then he came on up and dived at Ed. Twice Ed nailed him, but it was like

[*Turn page*]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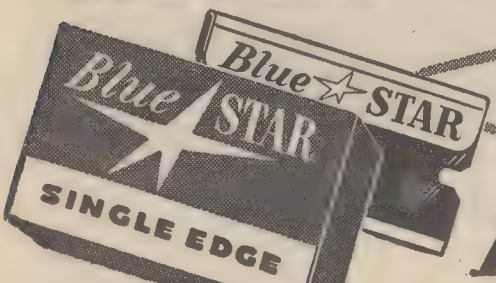


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hitting a bull between the eyes, and for one terrifying second Ed thought he had lost his steam, that Blount couldn't be stopped.

Again Blount got his arms around Ed and hung on, trying to drag him down, his full weight on Ed. Grabbing a handful of hair, Ed forced the man's head back. It came an inch, then another, Blount's neck muscles straining with resistance, then his wide chin was exposed and Ed hit him with a down-driving left.

Pain ran up Ed's arm and for a moment Ed thought he had broken his hand. Blount's grip gave way and he slid to the floor, head banging on a loose board that gave out a queer, sustained sound.

Ed stepped back and leaned against the bar. The room tipped crazily for a few seconds. He looked at Laredo and the stranger, but both seemed blurred. Then he heard Laredo say in a fuzzy voice, "Put your iron up, Thorn. I just take orders and right now Tom ain't giving none."

Ed grabbed his hat from the bar and put it on. He lurched out of the saloon, pushing the batwings back with both hands. He went on to the horse trough and sloshed water over his face, then he put his left hand into the cool water and closed it and opened it, thankful it wasn't broken. He was thankful, too, that it was his left, for he had accomplished nothing except to make real trouble inevitably, trouble that would be settled with guns.

Mike was beside him, asking anxiously, "You hurt, boy?"

"Not much, but I reckon I look like hell."

Ed straightened, wiping his left hand on his pants leg, and he thought of Keller saying, "You're the kind of hombre who figures he can settle everything with his fists, ain't you, Allen?" Then he thought of Janey and he wondered what she would say when she looked at his face.

"We'd better see if Doc's in town," Mike began.

"No. We'll get out of here before somebody starts throwing lead. Can't get Janey mixed up in it. Go get her and high tail out of town. I'll catch up as soon as I see Keller."

He didn't wait to hear what Mike had to say. It was still difficult for him to think clearly, but there were some questions rooted in his mind that he wanted answered before he left town. It was possible that Keller would have the answers.

Keller was still alone in the bank. He looked up, his sallow face shadowed by fear when he saw who it was. His right hand moved toward a drawer and fell away when Ed said, "No trouble, Keller. I've just had some with Blount. I've got a few questions and I want straight answers."

"Ask them," Keller said tonelessly.

"When Blount bought the Rocking C, he got it for a song and we had the notion he didn't have any loose dinero to throw around. What did he pay you for the MT mortgage?"

"Ten percent more than its face value," Keller said, "and don't ask me where he got the money. I don't know."

"He just offered Mike twelve hundred dollars to sign the MT over to him. Why would he do that when he could get it for nothing if he waited?"

"I don't have the answer to that, either. He must want it now. Maybe he stumbled onto some gold."

Ed shook his head. "Nobody's ever found any mineral in this country and it's been prospected plenty. Must be something else."

"If I knew I'd tell you," Keller said.

"One thing's sure. The MT's worth something to somebody, or Blount wouldn't be after it like he is. Why don't you gamble on it and loan Mike enough to get through the winter?"

Keller was silent for a moment, elbows on his desk, fingers forming a steeple in front of his face. He said finally, "A banker can't afford to gamble in times like these. You ought to know that, Allen. But if you find out why the MT is valuable and how much it's worth, I'll see Mike through."

It was as much as Ed could expect from Keller. He said, "I'll find out," and left the bank, not having the slightest idea how he'd find out and knowing that time was the thing that could lick Mike.

THE TINHORN in the black derby was waiting at the hitch rack when Ed came out into the street. He held out a hand, saying, "I'm Flint Madden. You're a damned good fighting man, Allen."

Ed said, "Thanks," and shook hands, finding Madden's palm as soft as he had expected. He felt an instinctive dislike for the fellow as he did anyone who made an easy living off other men who worked for theirs. Too, there was a false heartiness about Madden's voice that made him suspicious.

"I'm looking for an investment in this country," Madden went on smoothly. "At times like these when prices are low a man with money can usually pick up a bargain. I need men, good men like you. From the talk with Blount, I take it your job with Thorn won't last long."

"It'll last for me," Ed said shortly.

"I'll pay well," Madden urged. "All I ask from a man is his loyalty."

"I ain't interested," Ed said.

He moved around the hitch rack and mounting, rode out of town, his left hand aching with a steady nagging pain. He caught up with Mike and Janey at the foot of the grade, and the first look Janey gave him showed how she felt.

"Fighting," she said scornfully, "like a kid with a chip on his shoulder."

"Sure," he snapped. "The world has other things in it beside cows and horses and guns."

"And fists," she said challengingly.

"Janey," Mike said, his tone sharper than Ed had ever heard him use on her, "I haven't told you."

She looked at her father questioningly. "Told me what?"

"It was my fight," Mike said somberly. "I'm too old for fighting and Ed knew it. He took it up and gave Blount a hell of a good licking."

He told her what had happened, and suddenly Janey was contrite and humble. She laid a hand on Ed's arm, saying softly, "I'm sorry, Ed. We'll hurry home and I'll doctor you up."

They put their horses up the grade. The wind was sharper now than it had been, breathing down from the snow peaks to the west. Ed shivered. He was tired and hungry and he hurt in a dozen places, places where he had not known Blount had hit him, and his thoughts made a sour pattern in his mind. He wondered how much a man had to do for a woman before she understood how much he loved her....

The sun was well over to the west by the time they reached the MT. For once Mike did not raise his eyes to the mountains. He rode with his head bent, face heavy with worry. When they reached the ranch, he said, "Get a fire going, Janey, and heat some water. Do what you can for Ed. He should have had a doctor."

"I'm all right," Ed muttered.

"You come into the house with me," Janey said sharply. "You need looking after and don't start an argument."

"I'll put the horses up," Mike said.

Ed followed Janey into the house, too tired to argue, and watched her build a fire and set the tea kettle on the front of the big range. When the water was hot, she made him soak his left hand that had stiffened since the fight, then she carefully washed the cuts and bruises on his face and doused them with turpentine. He gritted his teeth against the biting pain and, lifting his hand from the hot water, he rose and dried on a towel hanging on he wall.

As he walked out, Janey called, "I'll get dinner right away."

Ed rolled a cigarette and hunkered on the porch. The late afternoon sunlight slanted at him in a bright glare. He pulled his hat low over his eyes and stared at the mountains with the orange patches of aspen on their lower slopes and the long green fingers of spruce that reached upward to the timber line.

He remained that way for a long moment, pondering this scene and realizing that the country had always been strange and repellent to him because he had come from the plains. To him the mountains were nothing more than a hell of a rough country to ride for cattle, and for that reason a good place to stay away from unless necessity drove him there.

It was understandable that a man like Mike would have an attachment to a piece of country that his wife had loved. It was understandable why he had come here in the first place. But Ed could not understand why a man who was as smart as Mike would insist on staying here when his string was played out and he could have had twelve hundred dollars in his pocket.

MIKE CAME from the barn. Hunkering beside Ed, he filled his pipe. For a moment they smoked in silence, and it struck Ed that Mike Thorn was the easiest man to be with he had ever worked for. He glanced briefly at Mike and was surprised at the stubborn set of the old man's features, the familiar gentleness gone from his face.

"I reckon I know what you're thinking," Mike said at last. "Maybe I should have taken Blount's offer, but I don't cotton to being shoved into anything. Besides, that ornery son is the last man I want to see owning the MT."

Honest with himself now, Ed realized he would have reacted exactly as Mike had to Blount's offer, and he respected the old man for his stubborn courage.

He said, "I savvy that. Well, we've got a little time. Why don't I hike into Denver and see if I can sell them steers? You stay here with Janey."

"I'm too old to count on a miracle, and that's what it'll take to save us." Mike was silent for a moment, pulling on his pipe with steady patience. Then he added, "When I was young, I was full of vinegar just like you are. I'd lost some of it by the time I got married, and I lost some more living with Janey's mother. I just want to get along, Ed, and now it don't even look like I can do that."

Clouds had gathered around the mountain peaks and the wind was steady and cold, making a faint moaning sound in the timber on the ridge behind the house. The cattle were drifting down the valley, seeking shelter in the brush along the creek. Snow was coming, Ed thought. It might not reach the valley, but by sunup the mountains would be white.

"I've been thinking, Ed," Mike went on. "We've got trouble. Blount ain't done. I don't like to pull you into a fracas. Maybe if you'd kind of see things the way Janey does, she'd say yes to you and you two could take the cattle and move down to East Park."

"We'll play this out together," Ed said sharply. "We wouldn't leave you alone if we was getting married tonight."

From the back of the house Janey called, "Dinner."

The men rose. Mike knocked out his pipe against his heel. Then he looked at Ed, his blue eyes mild and gentle again as they usually were. For a moment at least he had pushed Blount into the back of his mind.

"Mighty lucky day for me when you rode in here asking for a job," Mike said. "I ain't thanked you for what you done today—"

"Don't," Ed cut in. "No need to."

Mike shrugged. "All right, but you know how I feel. Someday when you're older and the vinegar in your blood ain't quite as bitey as it is right now, I'll tell you 'bout a dream me and Janey's mother used to have. I won't tell you now 'cause you'd say I was loco and you might be right at that."

They went into the house and sat down at the table, Ed wondering about this dream of Mike's. It was probably the reason he was hanging onto the MT when plain horse sense said the smart thing to do was to get out with what he could. Mike was still counting on a miracle whether he would admit it or not.

Ed ate with wolfish appetite, for it was late in the afternoon and there had been no noon meal. When he finished he went back to the front porch, still stiff and sore from his fight with Blount.

He smoked a cigarette, the guilty knowledge weighing heavily upon him that there was work to be done but he didn't feel like doing it. His thoughts turned to Blount, worried thoughts, for he was sure, as Mike had said, that the Rocking C man was not done, and Janey's presence added to the problem.

THE SUN was almost buried in the swirling clouds above the high peaks when Ed saw the two riders come out of the brush along the creek and angle up the slope toward the house. He called, "Mike, we've got company." A moment later the men were close enough to identify. One was Laredo, the other was the dude with the black derby, Flint Madden.

Mike came out of the house. He paused beside Ed, breathing hard. Ed said, "Better take Janey into town and leave her there. She'd be safer."

"She wouldn't go," Mike said. "Let's see what these huckleberries want."

They crossed the yard and walked toward the creek, Ed lifting his gun and easing it back into leather. He had never seen Laredo draw, but the man would be fast enough, perhaps too fast. Ed had lived with trouble during a good part of his life, long enough to learn when to expect it, a sort of sixth sense that now laid a faint chill of warning along his spine.

Madden and Laredo reined up, Madden saying, "This is a business call, Mr. Thorn. I didn't get a chance to talk to you in town."

"Make your spiel," Mike said. "I didn't figure this was a meeting of the Paradise Valley sewing society."

Madden laughed politely. "You're right. I'm Flint Madden, Mr. Thorn. I came from Denver several days ago and I've been looking the country over with the idea of investing somewhere in this area. I like this valley very much."

"That's fine," Ed said. "The scenery's free."

"Now don't misunderstand me," Madden said quickly, his tone heavy with the false heartiness Ed had detected when he'd talked to the man in town. "I have a deal on the fire with Tom Blount. I expect to buy the Rocking C, but I have to own all the valley, not half of it. So you see my deal with Blount depends on making a deal with you."

Ed jabbed a finger at Laredo. "What's he tagging along for?"

Madden shrugged. "Company. That's all. I'm staying the night with Blount, but he was too busy to come with me. Now Mr. Thorn, I realize that prices are low these days and I'll be frank to admit that is the reason I'm buying. No one knows what conditions will be five years from now. I'm gambling they'll be better. That's why I'll buy the MT if you'll put a fair price on it."

"It's mortgaged," Mike said.

"I understand that," Madden said quickly. "I'll pay Blount off. In time he'll be in position to close you out, but I'm not a patient man. I want to settle this business while I'm here. I have some plans for Paradise Valley and I hope to start working on them at once."

"What sort of plans?" Ed asked.

He was watching Laredo who sat easily in his saddle, right hand brushing gun butt, pale eyes expressionless. Ed had not been fooled by Madden's explanation of the gunman's presence. The tinhorn had brought him along as a threat. This was the same sort of pressure Blount had tried to apply in Tail Holt, but far more deadly in its implication, a point which Mike would not overlook.

Madden hesitated before answering Ed's question. He cuffed his derby to the back of his head, glancing at Laredo as if wanting to be certain the gunman was backing him.

Then he said, picking his words carefully, "I plan to build a hunting lodge in Paradise Valley. I've been told this is not cattle country, but it is perfect for my project."

"You've got scenery here," Mike conceded.

"More than that," Madden said, "I understand the creek furnishes fine fishing, and the mountains are rich with wild animal life. I expect to make a big investment here, but you can see my point. I can't run the chance of someone putting in a rival establishment across the creek from mine, so I'll have to own all the valley. What are you asking for the MT?"

"I ain't selling," Mike said.

"But it's good business—"

"You heard him," Ed cut in. "Dust along."

"I'll give you three thousand dollars," Madden said hurriedly. "That should be a fair offer, considering everything."

"Git." Mike made a sweeping gesture with his right hand. "Drift."

Ed's eyes were pinned on Laredo's dark face.

"Got some notions, mister?"

"Not just now," Laredo answered, "but I will have."

Madden's face had turned ugly. "What in hell is the matter with you, Thorn? I'm offering you three thousand dollars you won't get if Blount closes you out."

"I'll get along," Mike said. "Now git off my range and stay off."

WITHOUT another word Madden wheeled his horse and cracked steel to him. Laredo raised a hand in mock farewell. "So long," he said. "We'll be back."

"You'd better come smoking," Mike shouted. "I'm getting mighty damned tired of this business."

Laredo rode away, catching up with Madden before he reached the creek.

Ed said, "What do you make of it?"

"For some reason," Mike said slowly, "them yahoos want the MT so bad they can taste it."

"Madden wouldn't be building no hunting lodge this time of year," Ed said. "Looks to me like it's something else."

Mike swung around and walked back up the slope, Ed keeping step with him. Ed said, "I thought maybe Keller would know, but he claims he don't. How far do you trust that nickel grubber?"

"He'd tell you if he knew," Mike said, and turned toward the barn.

Ed went into the house and crossed the front room to the kitchen. Janey was drying dishes, and when she heard him, she turned and put her dishcloth down. "What did they want?"

He told her, adding, "We've got trouble. I dunno why, but we've got it. I'll saddle up for you and take you to town. No sense making bullet bait out of yourself by staying here."

She threw her head back, lips pressed tightly together. "I won't budge a step. If it's dangerous for me, it's dangerous for you and Dad."

"I can smell a fight coming," he said. "That's man business. You're a woman, in case you need to be told."

She tilted her head farther back, her chin pointed defiantly at him as it was so often when she resisted him. "I can shoot, Mr. Allen, and I'll do my part of it."

He looked at her, hungry for her, and he wondered how it would be if they were married, if their wills would always clash this way. Then he remembered Mike saying that when he had kissed Janey's mother, she had liked it and everything had been fine between them.

"I love you, Janey," Ed said. "I reckon you know it's the reason I'm here. I wouldn't work nowhere else where I wasn't getting paid. Will you marry me?"

"No."

He put his arms around her and brought her to him. He felt her body stiffen and she turned her head. He put a hand under her chin and forced her face around so that her mouth was under his. Then he kissed her and suddenly she was changed. Her arms came around him and she clung to him, and her mouth was hungry for his.

He let her go, saying softly, "I'm asking you to marry me, Janey. Mike said that it might be different between us if I could see things your way. I'll try, Janey. I'll try all my life."

She was motionless in his arms, her face quite close to his, and he felt the pressure of her firm breasts against his chest. She made no effort to hide the desire that she had for him. Her lips were softly parted and holding a small smile.

"That's the first time you've ever showed you had a little softness in you," she said. "I love you, Ed, but I can't marry you. Not now."

"If you love me—"

"It wouldn't be enough," she said. "You'd try to see things my way. I know you'd try, but you couldn't. I don't think you'll ever really change, Ed. When the time came, you'd still depend on your gun and your fists, and I can't spend my life with a violent man."

That was typical of the way women's minds worked, he thought bitterly. A man never knew what was in their heads. They couldn't argue in a straight line. They always had to drag something foolish into it. There was a time for softness, but there was a time for violence, too, when a man's life or property depended on how well he used his fists or his gun. This was a violent country. Janey should know that. She'd been raised here.

FOR A LONG moment he stood looking at her tanned oval face with its high cheek bones that directed a man's gaze to her blue eyes, so dark that at times he thought they were purple. He wondered why he had to fall in love with Janey Thorn, of all the women he had met—Janey who said she loved him and in the same breath said she couldn't marry him.

A sense of injustice grew in him, and he said angrily, "That's a hell of a way to talk. If I wasn't what you call a violent man, I wouldn't even be alive."

She drew back, her arms falling to her sides. "I know, Ed. I'm thankful for all you've done for us and—and taking up that fight with Blount. I tell you I'm thankful even if you think it's a hell of a way for me to talk."

"Haven't I proved I love you?" he demanded. "Working like I have and staying here when I wasn't getting paid and fighting Blount. Why, just a minute ago I was wondering if Laredo was going for his gun. If he had, I'd have pulled and one of us would be dead. Sure it would have been violence. What do you want me to do, lie down and roll over like a whipped pup?"

She shook her head, the defiance gone from her. "You don't understand what I mean, Ed. It's like right now. You're mad and you're shouting at me. It would be that way every time I didn't do what you wanted me to do."

"It ain't so—" He stopped. Maybe he wanted to own her, and Janey was not the docile kind who could be dominated by any man. "All right, Janey. I guess it wouldn't work."

He stalked out of the room, then he heard her call, "Ed," and he turned back. She said, "I'd do anything for you except marry you."

"Funny," he murmured. "Downright funny on account of marrying me is the one thing I want you to do."

He went out into the thin light of early evening. Mike was in the log barn working on a bridle. He glanced at Ed's stormy face, saying mildly, "I'd sure like to know what makes them hombres so damned anxious to get the MT all of a sudden."

"How are we fixed on ammunition?"

"We got plenty. You figure we're in for a siege?"

"Laredo wasn't talking just to hear his

tongue rattle when he said they'd be back. If there was time, I'd high tail for the sheriff."

"No use." Mike shook his head. "Ain't no laws been broke yet."

"So we sit around and get ourselves some lead colic before he'd do anything." Ed rolled a smoke, scowling. "Janey won't go. Says she can shoot and if it's dangerous for her, it's dangerous for us."

Mike grinned, pleased by that. "That's Janey for you. She can shoot, too."

"But damn it, she won't marry me because I'm a violent man. What's she gonna do with her Winchester, crochet?"

Mike laid the bridle down. He said thoughtfully, "She didn't mean that. She's a lot like her mother. She's talking about something that's inside you, something you don't even know you've got. It's the vinegar that's in your blood. Right now it's got a hell of a good bite to it. I ain't saying that's wrong. Keep it in its place and it's good. Just needs a little diluting far as Janey's concerned."

Now, looking at Mike's gentle face, it seemed to Ed that he was beginning to understand. Janey had lived with Mike all her life, and Mike had been past forty when she was born. She was measuring Ed against her father and she had found a quality missing in him that age had brought to Mike.

"I ain't hanging around her twenty years to get diluted," Ed said.

"Not twenty years," Mike said, "but you'll have to give her a little time. Looks to me like patience is one thing you ain't got. You'll need some if you ever get Janey to marry you."

NIGHT moved in swiftly now that the sun was down, the sullen clouds sinking lower over the peaks. The stars began to glitter with frosty brilliance and the wind still hurried down from the mountains, thrusting bone-deep into a man with its biting chill.

Ed could not guess what Laredo and the others would do, but he was reasonably sure of one thing. Immediate possession of the MT represented a fortune to Blount and Flint Madden, and they would not pass it up without making another effort.

Ed insisted upon barring both doors of the house and covering the windows with blankets so no light would show.

There were two Winchesters in the house besides his own. He laid them out on the pine table in the living room and asked Mike to bring all the shells he had in the house. Six boxes! Not enough if they were in for a protracted siege, but both Ed and Mike had their sixguns and belts of shells. And Janey had a short-barreled .32 that would be of some use if it came to a finish fight at close range.

There was no sign of panic in either Mike or Janey. Ed was reassured by that as he paced restlessly around the house, considering one plan after another and failing to settle on any of them. He wasn't a man who could sit inside a house and be shot at, and he had a hunch that if he could get Laredo, Blount and Madden would cave. But tackling the Rocking C against the three of them didn't look like a good bet. . . .

It started within an hour from the time full darkness had settled upon the valley. A rifle shot came from the aspens above the house, the crack as sharp as a dry limb snapping. The bullet must have gone high overhead. Another shot, then a third, and this time the slug found a window.

There was the tinkle of broken glass falling, a round hole appeared in the covering blanket, and the bullet slapped into the wall between the kitchen and the front room.

"Get down!" Ed shouted. "On the floor!"

He sprawled flat beside the kitchen range, Mike and Janey obeying without question. Several minutes passed, then the rifleman opened up again, most of the bullets plowing harmlessly into the log wall of the house.

Janey crawled to Ed, asking, "Are we going to hug the floor all night?"

"Don't figure on doing no sleeping," he said. "I've got a hunch that jasper is just trying to worry Mike. Madden will show up in the morning with another offer."

"He can go to hell," Mike snapped.

"Or he may wait two, three days," Ed said. "We've got grub, but mighty little water. If we go after it in the daytime, he'll pot us easy."

"Then we'll go at night," Janey said. "And maybe run into a couple of 'em hiding along the creek."

"We could use that sheriff now," Mike said.

"I'd better go after him. Can I count on both of you staying inside?"

For the first time he saw real fear in Janey's face. She whispered, "Don't go, Ed."

"We've got to have help," Ed said. "What do you think, Mike? I won't have no trouble if I get out before the moon comes up."

Mike nodded. "Reckon it's the time to go."

"I'll be gone for a while. Maybe till tomorrow night. I asked you if I could count on you and Janey staying in the house?"

MIKE HESITATED, chewing on his lower lip. It was a hard choice for the old man. Ed understood how much pride there was in him. It was not something he relished, Ed taking the risk for him, and he would be thinking there was a good chance Blount or Madden or both of them were in front of the house and perhaps hiding in the brush along the creek.

If Ed made a break for it, they'd hear his horse and they'd cut loose. Even in the darkness there was a chance a stray slug might connect.

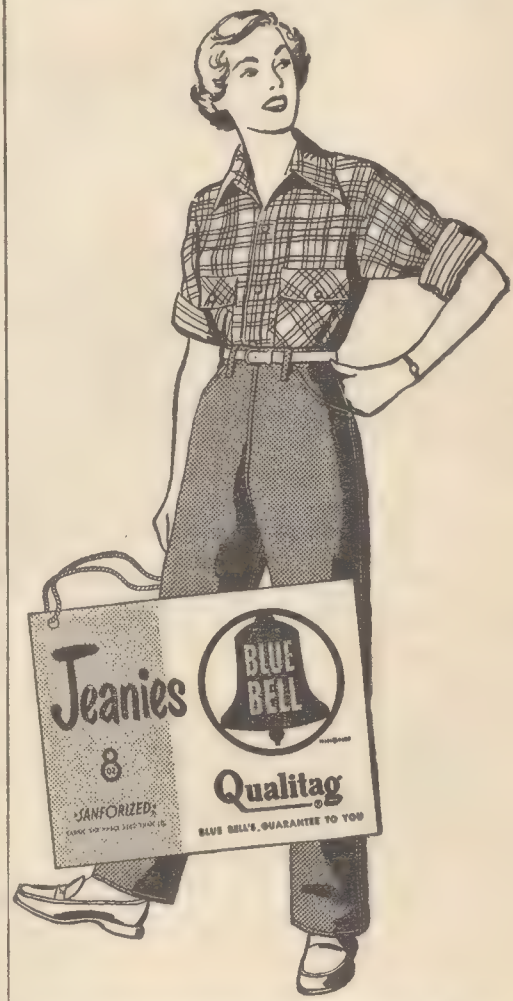
"All right," Mike said at last. "I reckon you can make a faster ride than I can, and you'll have to bust the breeze if you fetch the sheriff back here by tomorrow night."

"I'll make it," Ed said. "Blow the lamp out. I'm going out through the front door. Get it barred as soon as I'm outside."

Mike nodded, understanding that their enemies might be within a few feet of the front door, waiting for this move which was the natural one for either Ed or Mike to make.

[Turn page]


# How to buy better work and play clothes

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Janey, silent until now, burst out, "It isn't right, Dad. This is our fight and Ed's taking the risks."

"Got a better idea?" Ed demanded.

"Yes." Her chin was pointed defiantly at him again. "I'll go. I can ride as well as you can and I'm lighter. I can make the trip quicker than either one of you."

"No," Ed said. "You're staying inside if I have to hogtie you. Will you promise to keep her here, Mike?"

"I'll keep her all right."

"They wouldn't shoot a woman," Janey cried.

"Think they can see it's a woman?" Ed shouted at her. "That's the craziest thing you've said yet."

"I don't care if it is crazy," Janey screamed. "You don't have to be brave—"

"I ain't. I'm so scared my bones are rattling. Listen, you chuckle-headed idiot, if Madden and Blount get their hands on you, Mike will sign anything. Have you thought of that?"

She was silent, staring angrily at him, and he knew from her expression that she hadn't. Then the firing started again and kept on until the rifleman had emptied his Winchester. One bullet found the window, the rest slapped futilely into the log wall or missed the house entirely.

"He ain't up there very far," Mike said, "or he wouldn't know where to shoot. Reckon a little light is getting through that blanket?"

"I don't think so," Ed answered. "Chances are he got up there before dark and got his bearings. He ain't aiming to do no real damage now. It's just a bluff. They're counting on you seeing the light by morning."

Ed crawled across the kitchen into the front room, Mike and Janey following, Mike bringing the lamp from the kitchen table.

Ed stepped into his bedroom for his sheepskin. When he returned, he said, "I'll leave the Winchesters in case you need 'em in the morning. Don't do no shooting now. You won't do nothing but give him a target."

"Good luck," Mike said.

Ed moved to the front door, glancing at Janey's pale taut face. He grinned at her, and he could not resist saying, "A violent man can't sit still all night while somebody's shooting at him."

She didn't say anything. She stayed on the floor, looking at him in the frantic way of a woman who may never see the man she loves again, and it crossed Ed's mind that she might have talked differently that afternoon if she could have foreseen what was ahead for them.

Then Mike blew the lamp out. Ed lifted the bar and placed it beside the door.

"Get this door barred pronto," Ed said, and sliding out, shut it behind him.

For a moment he stood there, motionless, his lean back pressed against the log wall, his hand on gun butt. The door had squealed when he opened it, the sound ominously loud in the stillness, and he expected someone to start firing from the front of the house.

HE WAITED until his eyes were accustomed to the darkness, ears straining for some slight hint of movement out there in the covering blanket of darkness. There was none. He did not know how long he stood there. He had no capacity for measuring time.

He stepped down off the porch, a board squeaking underfoot, and at once he dropped flat, cursing his bad luck for stepping on the one loose board that would announce his presence. Still nothing happened. He crawled toward the barn, making no sound until he reached the corrals, then he rose and lunged forward to the barn and stopped, listening.

The rifleman began firing again. From where Ed stood he was able to locate the man. He could see the ribbon-like flashes of powder flame. He could hear the reports echoing out across the valley.

Fastening the man's position in his mind, Ed worked upslope through the aspens that crowded the ranch buildings on the north, and when he had gained enough altitude, he angled to his right so he would reach a point above and behind the rifleman.

Ed had not seriously considered riding for the sheriff. Neither Janey nor Mike would have agreed to the plan he had decided upon, so he had told them he was going for help. Mike had accepted that because it promised less danger to Ed than staying inside the cabin, and the old man agreed with Janey that it was their fight, not Ed's, and Mike would want him out of it.

There was no doubt in Ed's mind that Mike expected Madden and Blount to move in before dawn. The ranch house was not the fortress they had talked about it being. If nothing else, it could be burned. That was something Ed had to prevent, but his first job was to knock the rifleman out of the fight. If he could get the fellow to talk, he'd find out what this was about and he'd decide then what to do.

The aspens were all around Ed, their white trunks vague, ghostly pillars, leaves making a never-ceasing whisper in the night wind. Ed paused, not quite sure of the rifleman's position. He had moved slowly and noiselessly, not knowing how much time he had taken, but judging it must have been close to half an hour since he had left the barn.

Now a new fear plagued him. Possibly his man had gone. This was the longest period of silence since the firing had started.

Ed waited several minutes, his gun in his hand. It was not quite as cold as it had been. The aspens gave some protection, but the wind was still up, breathing through the tops of the trees.

Then a match flamed directly below him, not more than fifty feet from where he stood, and presently he caught the fragrance of a cigar.

Very carefully Ed moved downslope. Before he had covered half the distance the rifleman began firing again. Ed moved faster, the cracking of the Winchester covering the sound of his movements. Five shots this time. Silence then, and Ed was close enough to see the red tip of the man's cigar.

"You're covered, mister," Ed said. "Throw your irons over here—"

Startled, the fellow wheeled and fired at the sound of Ed's voice. It was an instinctive action of self-preservation, but the man was scared and surprised, and his shot was wild. Ed let go three times and lunged sideways. He had not wanted it this way, but he'd been given no choice. He lay belly-flat in the grass, partly protected by the trunk of an aspen, and there he waited, holding back the two loads that remained in his gun.

Ed heard the labored breathing of the man, then it stopped. Still Ed waited, weighing the possibility that the man was holding his fire and hoping Ed would give his position away against the chance that the fellow was dead.

When he found the waiting intolerable, he crawled downslope, his cocked gun in his hand. Then his left hand, reaching forward, touched the limp body on the chest. There was no movement. The man was dead and Ed felt the keen thrust of disappointment. He would learn nothing from him now.

THUMBING a match to flame, Ed held it to the fellow's face. A stranger! Ed put the match out at once, pondering this. It was a reasonable guess that Flint Madden had brought this man with him. Ed had not cut down the odds by killing him, and he still had no way to determine what Madden's and Blount's next move would be.

Then another thought struck Ed with paralyzing impact. If Madden had brought one man with him, he might have brought more. The stakes he was playing for, whatever they were, must be bigger than Ed had guessed.

For a long time Ed remained motionless. He heard a horse stomp among the aspens somewhere off to his left. He rose and, slipping new loads into the cylinder, dropped his gun into holster. It took some time to locate the horse. When he found him, he led him back to the dead man, and lifting the body, tied him into the saddle.

Earlier in the evening, he had thought of going to the Rocking C and decided against it. Now he reversed his decision.

He knew how Janey and Mike must feel, punished by the agony of fear both for themselves and for him. Mike had been right when he'd said Ed lacked patience. He could not hold back and wait for the other fellow to strike. He'd strike first and he'd do it before daybreak.

Ed led the horse downslope toward the MT buildings, angling to the west so he would come to the barn instead of the house. There was the chance Mike would hear him and come out, thinking it was the rifleman moving down upon them. Mike had promised to stay inside, but Ed had no assurance he would keep that promise. In any case, Mike would not expect him.

Ed came out of the aspens, the barn a dark, vague shape before him, and the sound of the horse's hoofs on the hard ground seemed magnified in the night stillness. Without warning, a gun sounded directly in front of him, the bullet tugging at the crown of his hat, powderflame a twinkling red tongue licking out at him.

Ed dropped flat, calling, "Mike, it's me." If this was Madden or Blount or Laredo, he was a dead man, but he could not return the fire until he knew. Then Mike's voice came to him, heavy with dread, "Ed, you fool. You all right?"

"All right, Mike." For a moment Ed could not move. Sweat broke through his skin. He lay on the ground, paralyzed by relief, knowing that he had never been closer to death in his life. "Good thing you didn't shoot straight," he said hoarsely. "Where the hell are you?"

"Here." Mike appeared out of the darkness. "Damn it, boy, I thought you was one of them. I supposed you was halfway to Tail Holt by now."

"I got the hombre who was shooting at us. I never saw him before."

Mike swore bitterly. "Ed, I wouldn't have stood for it if I'd knowed what you was up to. Why ain't you high tailing for the sheriff like you said you was going to?"

"I didn't intend to do no such thing. Time's what counts, Mike. I can't afford to waste the night and all day tomorrow riding for help and leaving you and Janey alone."

MIKE TOOK a long sighing breath. "Hell, I should have guessed you was up to some trick like this. But you should have told me. I came close to drilling you."

"You said you'd stay inside."

"All right," Mike said. "Maybe we'd better try being honest with each other. I was afraid somebody would sneak up and burn the house, and I figured I could come closer to stopping 'em by being out here than staying inside." He paused, then added thoughtfully, "I was wondering why I didn't hear your horse when you left."

"I'm taking him now and I'm going to the Rocking C. I'm getting boogery, not knowing what they're fixing to do or why they're doing it."

"They'll smoke you down," Mike said. "You can't tackle a job like that. Why hell, no man's good enough to buck them kind of odds."

"I've got a scheme," Ed said.

But Mike didn't move. Again Ed felt the pride that was in the old man, pride that would not permit him to let another man take the risk he should be taking, but he didn't know what to do about it. There was no gentleness in him now. His courage was like a rock in the bottom of a river, holding against the force of a hard current.

In that moment Ed came nearer to understanding Mike Thorn than he ever had before. He had misjudged the old man, mistaking his gentleness, his sentimentality, his love of the mountains for weakness. But there was no weakness in Mike. Nothing short of death would move him out of Paradise Valley.

"I'll go with you," Mike said at last. "I reckon you're right about time. We'll hit 'em, which same they won't be looking for."

"No," Ed said. "One man's got a better chance than two in a deal like this. Besides, you can't leave Janey."

"Damn it, she can look out for herself. What are you figuring on doing, committing suicide?"

"No. I told you I had a scheme. I'm toting this carcass over to the Rocking C for 'em to look at."

Ed went on to the corral for his horse.

Mike caught up with him, saying in a hard, bitter voice, "Why are they doing this? I never hurt nobody from the day I moved in here. I just wanted to live in peace. It was all Janey's mother ever wanted. Why, Ed? Why?"

"I aim to find out, Mike."

The old man's hand fell on his arm. "Don't you ride in again without hollering."

"I'll holler," Ed said, and wondered if he'd live long enough to ride in.

IT WAS not yet midnight when Ed reached the Rocking C buildings. They were set on a bench above the valley in much the same position the MT buildings were on the north side of the creek. The south ridge rose directly beyond the house, the aspens reaching to within fifty yards of the buildings.

The bench that slanted down towards the creek was grassy and open, holding nothing that would cover a man who wanted to reach the house without being seen. The moon, showing in the east above the tops of the pines, added its pale light to the starshine.

Ed reined up, studying the scene before him. There was a light in the house, its long yellow fingers probing the darkness from windows and an open door.

Ed could do one of two things. He could circle the house and worm his way around it to the front door and plunge through, hoping to gun down whoever was inside before they recovered from their surprise. Or he could ride in boldly, hoping they would think he was one of them, perhaps the rifleman. It seemed to him that the bold course was the better one.

It was a long chance either way. A more cautious man would not risk it. The unknown factors bothered Ed, and he considered them carefully. He could not tell how many men were here, or whether they were inside the house or outside waiting for him or Mike to make exactly this move.

[*Turn page*]

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Knowing Blount, Ed did not think it was a trap. Blount was a direct and overbearing man, so it was probable he was waiting until morning to make his play, depending upon the rifleman to soften Mike to the place where he'd be mighty glad to be out of it.

Still, it seemed strange that there was a lighted lamp at this hour. Ed could not distinguish any movement in the house. He heard nothing except the usual night sounds—an owl back in the timber, a coyote calling, the restless moving of horses in a corral.

Making up his mind, Ed rode directly toward the house, leading the horse with the dead man tied in the saddle. The faint chill that lay along his spine did not come from the raw wind that was flowing down the valley, but rather from the fear of the unknown, and the grim knowledge that if he made one slip he was a dead man. He had to play it right and he had to play it fast.

He pulled up outside the pool of light from the open door, and dismounting, stepped back to the horse he had been leading and slashed the ropes that held the body.

He eased the dead man out of the saddle and carried him to his buckskin, keeping the animal between him and the house. Then Laredo stood in the doorway, a tall slender figure with the lamp to his back.

To Ed this was the final proof that he was not expected.

"That you, Madden?" Laredo called.

"No. It's Allen. Blount here?"

"He's in town." Quickly Laredo stepped out of the doorway and put his back to the wall. "Thorn change his mind about selling?"

"No," Ed said. "I brought you something."

He held the dead man in front of him, supporting the slack weight with his left arm, his right free. He could make out Laredo's shape against the wall between the door and the window, and then he stepped into the light, the dead man shielding him.

A CRY CAME out of Laredo when he saw the dead man, a shrill involuntary sound. His hand drove downward to gun butt, he drew and fired. Ed expected this. He felt the dead man's body give with the hammering impact of the slug and then his own gun was talking. Again Laredo fired, his shot wide this time, and he came tumbling down off the porch in a headlong fall.

Ed dropped the dead man and ran toward Laredo, keeping out of the light and taking a zigzag course that made him hard to hit.

Laredo's gun had fallen in a pool of lamplight. He grabbed for it, coming up to his hands and knees. He tilted the barrel up, but he was too late. Ed knocked him flat with his second bullet, then he was standing over the man, kicking the gun from slack fingers.

Ed knelt beside Laredo and rolled him over, certain now that the gunman was alone. Blount was in town and Madden was out somewhere. If Madden had brought others to the valley besides the rifleman, they'd have bought into the fight before this if they were anywhere around. Still, a sense of caution made Ed slip back so he was in the shadows beyond the patch of light.

Laredo was not dead but he was going fast. He breathed, "You're a gutty cuss, coming in like this."

"Where's the rest of 'em?"

"Go out and look," Laredo whispered. "You'll find out. Or they'll find you."

"Why do Blount and Madden want the MT?"

"Ask 'em." Blood made a scarlet froth at the corners of Laredo's mouth. "I told 'em I oughtta get you out of the way first, but Madden didn't want no trouble. So I get it, in the brisket."

"Why is Blount in town?"

"Meeting the night stage. Mike's licked. It'll take more'n you to save his hide."

"Who's Blount expecting on that stage?"

Laredo was silent, fighting for each breath. Ed shouted, "You ain't got much time, Laredo! Damn it, who's he looking for? What's this all about?"

There might have been a derisive grin on Laredo's lips. Ed wasn't sure, but Laredo was a man who was capable of defiance even when he was dying. He was done talking.

Ed heard the thunder of hoofs coming in from the creek. Madden, Ed thought. He had probably been close enough to hear the gunfire, and he might not be alone.

No use waiting here. Ed ran to his horse, holstering his gun, and swung into saddle. He cracked steel to his buckskin, taking the road that led out of the valley, and presently the sound of hoofbeats died behind him.

Now Ed was plagued by indecision. He could not guess what Madden would do, but he was sure the man did not want to kill Mike. A dead man would not be signing any papers, and everything that Madden and Blount had done indicated that they wanted the ranch now.

Again Ed found himself facing a difficult choice. By hard riding, he could reach Tail Holt before the stage got in. Laredo had given him one important piece of information. Someone vital to Blount's and Madden's plans was on that stage. If they were after the MT, that person would be important to Mike, too.

Holding the buckskin to a fast pace, Ed made his choice. He'd meet the stage. If he had any luck, he could get back to the MT by sunup.

Ed came to the east end of the valley, the moon well up now, and started down the grade. He had to take the steep road at a slow pace, for the pines crowded it so closely that the moonlight was blotted out. At this point the road was little more than a trail, barely wide enough for a wagon, and it dropped swiftly in steep switchbacks to the floor of East Park.

The stage was due in Tail Holt at two. In bad weather it was habitually late, but on nights like this it was usually on time. Impatience prodded Ed, but he let his sure-footed buckskin take his own pace. If the animal stumbled and broke a leg, Ed would fail completely. Even now he was not sure he had made the right decision, for Mike's and Janey's safety was worrying him.

HE REACHED the bottom of the grade and brought his horse up into a run again. The road ran straight east to Tail Holt, and he could make out a few lights along Main Street. Minutes later he pulled up in front of the livery stable, eyes raking the street. The stage was not in sight.

He reined into the livery stable, calling, "Red." The hostler came along the runway, yawning loudly. Dismounting, Ed asked, "The stage in yet?"

"Nope." Red yanked his watch from a pants pocket and glanced at it. "Ain't two yet. Old McCoy don't ever get in ahead of time."

Ed laid a hand on the sweat-gummed back of his buckskin. "I've been riding him too hard. Rub him down, you hear?"

"I ain't deef," Red said. "What the hell's biting you? You're as bad as Blount. Got in here while ago all lathered up like he had a grizzly by the tail and couldn't hang on and couldn't let go."

"Soon as you take care of my horse, throw my saddle on that bay gelding. He's the fastest animal you've got, ain't he?"

"Sure, but what's the hurry? The stage gets in at two every night and nobody—"

"Do what I tell you." Ed handed the hostler a five dollar gold piece. "If you don't take care of my horse and have that bay ready, I'll skin you and hang your hide on your front door. Savvy?"

Red looked at the gold piece fondly. "Sure, I savvy."

Ed wheeled, suddenly remembering he had not loaded his gun after his fight with Laredo, and Blount was in town. He paused long enough to reload and slip his Colt back into leather, then he went into the street, moving swiftly out of the murky light of the lantern that hung over the archway. He figured Blount had probably heard him ride into town.

Pausing at the corner of the stable, Ed studied the street. The stage was due any time now, but he could not hear it coming. There was a light in the hotel. The stage would stop there and that was probably where Blount planned to meet it. The street appeared to be deserted, but there

were any number of places where Blount could hide, and Ed would be a target the instant he showed himself in front of the hotel.

There was one other thing he could do. He followed a narrow opening between the stable and a blacksmith shop, reached the alley and followed it to the back door of the hotel. It was locked, but there was a steep outside stairway that served as a fire escape. Ed climbed it to the second floor.

The door facing the landing was not locked. He stepped in, moving swiftly because he could not afford to let Blount meet the stage alone, and went down the carpeted stairway to the lobby.

The clerk got up from behind the desk and shook his head as if trying to clear the cobwebs from his mind. He had been asleep. Now he knuckled his eyes and peered at Ed, puzzled and not quite sure whether he was fully awake or not.

"What'd you come down the stairs for?" the clerk demanded. "You ain't signed for no room up there."

"I was hunting for a dime I dropped last Christmas. Have you seen Tom Blount?"

"Not lately I ain't. He don't hanker to see you I reckon. From the looks of his mug, he's seen too much of you already."

ED STEPPED into the street and moved away from the lamplight falling through the open door and windows of the hotel lobby. He took a long breath as relief poured through him. Blount had not been in the lobby, so he must be along the street somewhere. Ed had expected Blount to open up with his sixgun the instant he appeared in the hotel doorway. Then he froze as the muzzle of a gun prodded him in the back.

"Hook the moon, Allen," Blount said in a low tone. "I've got a notion I'd like to make two pieces out of your backbone."

Ed raised his hands, cursing the bad luck that had made him step into this when he had been so careful, thinking he was playing it the safest way he could.

"They've been known to hang men for murder in this country, Blount," Ed said.

"Yeah, I've heard of that." Blount lifted Ed's gun from holster and stepped back. "Right now I want you out from under foot. Walk to the stable and get on your horse. Ride out of town and stay out."

"It's not Allen who's leaving town," Lew Keller called from somewhere behind Blount. "I've got a shotgun loaded with buckshot, Blount. Put your cutter up or I'll give it to you in the back."

Ed turned his head. He could make out the vague shape of the banker on the boardwalk, and he saw that Blount was looking back, caught in a trap of indecision. Ed jumped toward Blount, knocking the man's gun barrel away from him with a swipe of his left hand.

"Good," Keller said. "Don't move, Blount." He walked up slowly, keeping his shotgun lined on the Rocking C man. "Get your iron from him, Allen. I think I hear the stage coming."

Blount had slipped Ed's gun into his waistband. Ed jerked it out and rapped Blount's knuckles with the barrel. Blount dropped his .45 and Ed kicked it into the street.

"Now we'll talk," Keller said in a relieved tone. "Go tell Madden it won't work. I got a letter this afternoon from John Price, so I know all about it. You can tell your tinhorn friend that I'll see Mike Thorn through if he needs money. He'll be able to pay your interest when it's due. Now drift."

Wheeling, Blount headed for the stable in a lumbering run. Ed could hear the stage coming in from the east. He asked, "Who's this John Price?"

"The answer to all the questions that've been prodding you and Mike," Keller said. "I should have known. Reckon I did know, but I wasn't sure. It was just a guess till I got his letter, and by that time you and Mike had left town. I aimed to meet the stage, so I figured there wasn't any big hurry. Then I saw you ride into town and I knew Blount was waiting out here, so I got my scattergun."

"You still ain't told me—"

"Price can tell you all of it. He'll be on this stage. Had any trouble?"

"Nothing but trouble. If you knew—"

"I tell you I didn't know. Not for sure. Price was here last spring. At that time the government was considering several places, so I didn't know Paradise Valley was the one they'd decided on. Blount and Madden must have found out. That's why they were in such a hell of a lather to grab the MT."

THE STAGE was there then, wheeling in close to the boardwalk in front of the hotel. A tall man in a Stetson and corduroy suit stepped down. He saw Keller who moved toward him with his hand outstretched, and he said, "Mighty nice of you to meet me, Mr. Keller."

"Been mighty nice if you'd let me know a little sooner," Keller said sharply. "Price, meet Ed Allen. He rides for Mike Thorn."

Price shook Ed's hand, grinning broadly. "Pleased to meet you, Allen. Thorn in town?"

"He's penned up in his house and probably holding off some gun wolves with his Winchester," Ed said hotly. "What makes the MT so damned valuable? I'm tired of being in the dark."

Price scratched his head, puzzled. "What are you talking about, gun wolves and Winchesters. I want to buy the MT because it's in Paradise Valley."

"I killed two men tonight and came close to getting plugged a few times myself," Ed said. "We still don't know what it's all about. Or why a coyote named Flint Madden wants the MT."

Price looked at him as if horrified by what he had said. "Why, Madden has nothing to do with it."

"He's got plenty to do with it," Keller said. "But I don't savvy how he found out. You promised to notify me as soon as a decision was made, and I didn't hear from you till this afternoon."

"I'm sorry," Price said, abashed. "I've known Madden a long time. I play cards with him every time I'm in Denver. I've been there three days, checking on public land that will be inside the boundary and the private land that will have to be bought. I guess I talked too much, but it never occurred to me that Madden had any interest in Paradise Valley."

"He's a friend of Blount's," Keller said, "and they're trying to bulldoze Thorn into selling. He's about broke and the MT was mortgaged. I held the mortgage, but I sold to Blount, not knowing you'd decided on Paradise Valley."

"It wasn't just me," Price said quickly. "We've taken all summer to make a decision on the matter." He turned to Ed. "I represent the Department of the Interior and I have several hundred thousand dollars at my disposal to buy private land for a national park. We want the most primitive mountain section we can find, and we must have a spot to put up cabins and build a lodge. We want a running stream—"

"Let me get this straight," Ed broke in. "You want to buy both the MT and the Rocking C. How much?"

"That depends," Price answered evasively. "Perhaps ten thousand. We want to be fair, but we don't want to be held up.

[Turn page]

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That's why we haven't advertised our plans. If we can't get private land for a reasonable amount, we'll be forced to select another area for our development."

"But if Madden owned all the valley, he'd be in position to hold you up. That right?"

"Why, yes, I guess it is," Price admitted reluctantly.

"And he'd get it," Keller said. "Price, you know damned well there isn't any other valley in the country that's half as good for your purpose as Paradise. If Madden and Blount owned the MT along with Blount's ranch, you'd pay right through the nose."

"I'll see Thorn first thing in the morning," Price said contritely. "I tell you I had no idea Madden was interested in this deal, or that he even knew Blount."

"You'll see Thorn if he's still alive," Ed said.

"If anything happens to him, I'll punish his killers personally," Price cried. "I wouldn't have let trouble come out of this for anything in the world."

"His girl's with him," Ed said tonelessly. "It happens she's the most important person in the world to me. That's why I'm in the game."

"We let Blount go," Keller said. "I wasn't thinking. Now he knows we know—"

"I'll stop 'em," Ed said. "One more thing. Would it be possible for Thorn to hold back a few acres where his house and barn are?"

"I don't see why—" Price began.

"Because his wife is buried up there," Ed said. "The old man's hipped on staying in the valley. Don't ask me to explain it. He's just that way."

"We could make that arrangement," Price agreed. "Tell him we'll give him a good figure for his holdings—"

Ed was gone, running down the boardwalk to the stable. Turning through the archway, he called, "Red, where's that bay?"

The hostler lurched toward him, holding his head. "Blount's got him. I wouldn't let him have the bay, so he slugged me."

"What else have you got?"

"That black mare over yonder. She ain't as fast as the bay, but—"

"Saddle her up."

A moment later Ed left the stable, the wind in his face. The grim knowledge was in him that if he lived to be a thousand years old, he would never make another ride as important as this.

IT HAD begun to snow by the time Ed reached the top of the grade, the clouds and the wind-driven flakes resisting the efforts of the first dawn light to break through. Ed had no way of knowing how far Blount was ahead of him, or how soon Blount would find Madden. But he was sure of one thing. Whatever they planned to do they would do now. Time had run out for them.

There was some hope in Ed that Madden and Blount would give up their attempt to gain immediate title to the MT. The arrival of John Price in Tail Holt had changed the entire picture, and Keller's flat statement that he would give Mike the financial aid he needed had been the clincher.

But it was wishful thinking and Ed realized it at once. Blount was a bulldog of a man who never gave anything up, and Madden, obsessed by the tantalizing vision of a fortune dangling just beyond his finger tips, was not likely to quit, now that he had gone this far.

Ed rode with his head bowed against the wind, forcing all the speed he could from the mare and mentally cursing Blount for taking the bay gelding. He tried to guess what the Rocking C man would do, but he could not. He knew Blount had considerable start on him, he knew the gelding could outdistance the mare any day in the week. And it gave Blount a margin of time which might be fatal.

All of his thinking brought him no escape from one conclusion—Janey was Mike's weakness, so Blount and Madden would work through her.

Time and distance washed out in the oblivion of snow. It grew deeper on the road, slowing the mare, and fear grew in

Ed that she would not last until he reached the MT. He told himself they would not kill a woman. Janey would be safe.

But he knew he was not facing reality. If Mike was forced to sign his ranch over, it would not do for Blount and Madden to leave any living witness.

Mike and Janey would simply disappear, and in a wild country like this their bodies would never be found. In that case, their killers would answer only to the personal vengeance of Ed Allen. Even if he were lucky and that vengeance was complete, it would not bring Janey back to him.

Now, with the snow stinging his face and the morning light steadily deepening around him, one fact came home to Ed more forcibly than it ever had before. Janey's happiness was the only important thing in life to him.

THE WIND brought the sound of gunfire to him. The mare had given everything she had, but she was staggering now. He heard something else he could not identify for a moment, the hammering of wood against wood.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, there was a break in the curtain of snow. The MT ranch house was directly ahead of him. Three men were using a battering ram on the door. Then a contrary current of wind drove the snow across his vision again.

Ed reined up and swung down, not certain whether they had seen him or not. He drew his gun and ran forward, heard the crash of the door coming open. Another gunshot. Janey's revolver, he thought. He was close to the house, close enough to see a man break at waist and hip and come tumbling off the porch.

Blount and Madden saw him then, and they wheeled to face him, the wind sweeping Blount's hoarse cry to Ed's ears.

Suddenly the air was filled with gunfire. Ed caught Blount with his first shot, the heavy slug hammering the man back against the log wall of the house. Blount hung there a moment, gun hand sagging. Then his feet slid out from under him and he fell.

Madden had disappeared, probably around the corner. Ed heard Janey's call, "Ed, Ed, you all right?"

"All right," he shouted, and ran past the door to the corner of the house.

Of all the men who had brought this trouble to Mike, Madden was the one Ed held mostly responsible. Ed swung around the corner of the house. Again a .45 roared. Splinters jumped from the log wall, stinging Ed's face. He caught the snow-blurred figure of Madden disappearing around the back of the house and he ran after him.

"Ed."

It was Janey's thin cry coming from the front of the house. If he let Madden complete his circle he would run into the girl. Ed lunged on past the side of the house, tried to make a quick turn at the corner and slipped in the wet snow. He went down and came up at once, the front of his body

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white with the clinging snow.

Once more Madden threw a shot at him, the slug burning its white-hot path across his left side, and he saw that Madden was belly-flat directly in front of him. The gambler must have slipped and fallen trying to make the turn at the far corner of the house.

Ed fired and missed. Desperately cold, he lacked the co-ordination he would have had at any other time. Madden lay there, tilting his gun upward at Ed, and there was an instant now that seemed to drag out into an eternity.

But Madden was too careful in taking aim, too slow, and this time Ed did not miss. The gambler's hand dropped into the snow, then strength was gone from his body and his head sank forward. When Ed reached him, the man was dead.

Janey was there beside Ed, shaking his arm and saying over and over, "Ed, Ed, are you hurt?"

He put his arm around her, the gun still in his hand. "Just lost some hide along my ribs."

"Come into the house. Let me see."

He followed her, weak and sick now that it was finished. The front door hung grotesquely from one hinge and the room was cold. He asked, "Mike?"

"He got a crease that knocked him out."

The light was very thin in the house. Ed got the door back into place and dropped the bar to hold it. Then he lighted a lamp and saw that Mike was lying on the couch, a faint trickle of dried blood on his forehead. Ed nodded to himself. The old man would be all right.

JANEY had gone into the kitchen and filled the fire box with pine. She laid bandages and a bottle of whisky on the table, calling, "Ed, let me see where you're hit."

"I've got to take care of the mare."

"You're more important than any old mare. Let me see."

He obeyed rather than argue with her, and while he pulled off his sheepskin and shirt, he told her briefly about John Price and why the MT had suddenly become valuable.

"Get your undershirt off," she commanded, only half listening.

He hesitated, putting a hand to his side that was aching with a nagging pain, and she said sharply, "Don't be modest, Ed. You're hurt worse than you're letting on."

He looked at her pale face, surprised by her cool composure. Most women, he thought, would be hysterical if they had gone through half what she had. He got out of his undershirt and she ran exploring fingers along his ribs, nodding as if relieved.

"Not bad," she said. "Get down on the floor."

He obeyed, asking, "Did you hear what I said? About the MT?"

"I heard and I don't care. I've found out some things I didn't know last night. All the money in the world isn't important, but I know what is."

She washed his wound with a wet, hot cloth, then poured whisky over it and bandaged it. He got up and began dressing, not sure that she meant what he wanted her to mean.

"Will Mike take the deal?"

"Of course. He said he told you about the dream Mother and he used to have. This is it. Of course they never thought about a national park, but they had the idea they could start a sort of hotel where folks could come and enjoy the scenery. Dad never forgot it after she died, but he couldn't get enough money together to build the kind of place they used to talk about."

She stepped back, her chin thrust at him in the defiant way he had seen so many times. "I guess you'll never understand people coming to a place like this just to look at mountains."

"I reckon beauty ain't the same to all people," he said. "Some folks would do things I wouldn't, but they've got a right to do it." He reached for his sheepskin and shook it, making a wet spot on the floor. He looked at her, abashed. "I shouldn't have done that."

"It's all right," she said impatiently, and stood motionless as if waiting for him to say something.

"I've got a lot to do," he said. "I'll go fetch the doc."

"Ed, there's something else you're going to do first."

He put the sheepskin on the table. "I died a thousand times coming up here, not knowing what was happening to you and Mike. But there's one thing I'm more sure of than I ever was. I want you to be happy. If you married me, I reckon you wouldn't be—"

"Ed, Dad told me something last night after you left. He used to be a gun marshal when he was young. Said he was a lot like you. He changed when he got older and fell in love with Mother. He said you'd change."

She lowered her eyes, paused before she added, "Only I'm not sure I want you to change. You see, I learned tonight that there are times when I want my man to be violent." She glanced up, smiling. "I never understood that before."

He stared at her a moment, thinking that what she had said about Mike made some things clear he had never understood about the old man, and wondering if time would also change him as it had changed Mike.

He put his arms around her and she lifted her face for his kiss. Then he said, "I'll fetch a preacher when I bring the doc if that's the way you want it."

"Of course it's the way I want it," she said. "Why do you think I've been saving my mother's wedding dress all this time?"

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# KNOW YOUR WEST

**1. Experts at making a quick stop, Western cowhorses are taught to do it by "braking" chiefly on their front feet or their hind feet—which?**

**2. Is there a greater area of the United States east or west of the Continental Divide?**

**3. If an old-time cowboy should invite you out to his ranch "to see some op'ra," what would he probably mean?**

**4. I heard a Southwestern cowboy say they'd recently had "an Oklahoma rain" in the area where his ranch lay. What did he mean?**

**5. The names of two "Irvings"—Dr. Irving Langmuir and Dr. Irving P. Krick—have become pretty well known throughout the West in the past several years—in connection with what scientific undertaking?**

**6. Two Abilenes were notable cowtowns of the early West—in what two states?**

**7. The names "Charlie Rutlage, Billy Venero, Little Joe the Wrangler, Utah Carroll, A. J. Stinson, Bessie Lee and Old Ben Bolt" have what in common?**

**8. Is the off side of a cowhorse the side you get off on?**

**9. A lot of gringos pronounce it "on the kwee-DOW," but however you pronounce it, what does "on the cuidado" mean?**

**10. What are the differences between running irons, stamp irons and dotting irons?**

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

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**You will find the answers to these questions on page 131. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

# DEBT of HONOR

*By Ray Palmer Tracy*

**THE WEDDING WOULD go off on**

IN THE HEAT of the fall day, the weathered little Eastern Oregon frontier town, Summit City, had an air of stubborn endurance like an egg fried on both sides. It was cooler in the cramped parlor of the Emory Hotel, where Ma Emory and Peewee Williams were weaving a bridal bower in the corner just south of the horsehair sofa.

Ma removed a willow twig from a mouth nearly concealed as another fold of her chins. "Peewee," she asked, "did you hunt up Reverend Whipple when he was up from Alkali, yesterday, and hire him for tonight?"

"Huh?" Peewee's round, weathered face was preoccupied. "Oh, yeah, I saw him. I already give him five dollars cash."

"Good. You've been acting so much like a lost soul the last few days, I thought I'd better inquire." Ma replaced the twig among her chins and reached for a fireweed.

Ma Emory loved the engaging employment of gathering dollars. She had created a lucrative side business renting her parlor for weddings, when the fiancées of homesteading bachelors followed them to the new country. This time she was doing an unprecedented thing. Not only was she furnishing her parlor to Peewee free of charge, but it was at her suggestion and with her active help that the bridal bower was being woven.

Ma explained to the surprised Peewee, "When you get your tender-raised girl marooned on that ghastly dryland homestead in the middle of the big flat and pinned down to helping you flog a living out of it, I want her to have one pleasant memory."

In that offhand manner, Ma covered the real purpose behind her generosity. For Ma was under obligation to Peewee, and it irked her independent nature. She was taking this way to pay off what she considered a debt of honor.

During the terrible winter of a year ago, the roads became blocked with snow. Howling winds kept them that way. The situation hung on day after day. Ma, her hotel crammed with trapped travelers, ran out of fuel wood. There was no help from the townspeople. Like Ma, they were caught unprepared. If the mercury dropped a few more degrees, Ma could see herself treating her guests for frostbites. Furthermore, they were on the verge of being compelled to eat raw food.

It was then that the restless Peewee, out of sheer boredom, saddled his pony and battled his way from his dreary, snowbound homestead into town. He discovered the spot Ma was in. Being the kind he was, Peewee immediately organized a rescue party. Under his leadership, teams, men and shovels tackled the blocked road and headed for the timbered mountains twenty miles away.

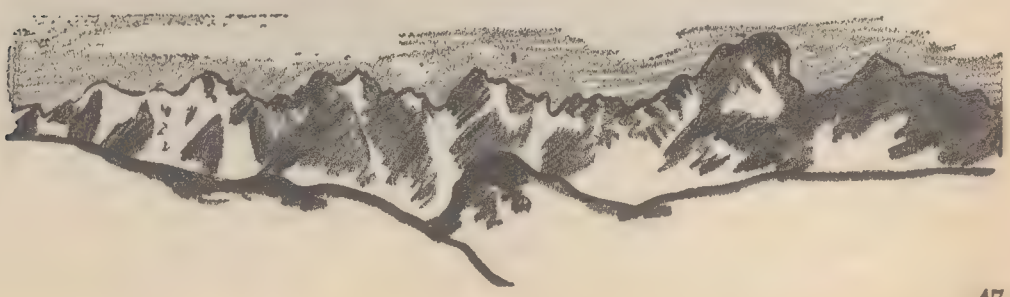
They were gone three days, but won through by sheer weight of numbers. Once again fires roared in the hotel stoves. The smells of cooking floated out of the kitchen. Peewee, his cheeks and nose nipped by frost, merely grinned at Ma when she brusquely tried to thank him. Naturally she couldn't offer him money for the service. It was the sort of help that only neighbors extend to neighbors in distress.

Now here was Ma's chance to be just as neighborly as Peewee had been. She was humming a satisfied little tune when Peewee interrupted.

"Ma," he said, "Reverend Whipple is a Baptist. Letty Boardman is a strict Methodist. That make any difference?"

"None whatsoever," assured Ma. "Not if your Letty is serious about marrying the likes of you—which seems possible, since she's coming all the way from Indiana. There, that does it."

**schedule—even if Ma had to scalp every danged man in town**



A smile of artistic accomplishment in her deep-set grey eyes, Ma steered her ample bulk back around a chair to where she could get a full view of the bower. "I declare if it ain't real pretty," she beamed.

Submerged in the creation of beauty they had wrought with fireweed, late summer daisies, coarse ferns and green willows gathered in the canyons which slashed the rugged plateau, Ma failed to notice that Peewee wasn't wholeheartedly sharing the triumph. His silence roused her curiosity.

PEEWEE was bracing his short, stocky figure by leaning his hands on the marble-topped center table. The twinkle that made his brown eyes so attractive was missing. His gaze was fixed on the bower with gloomy foreboding.

"What's biting you?" demanded Ma. "You're gawping at our bower like it was a scaffold. Getting cold feet?"

"No, it ain't that," denied Peewee. "It's Lew Peabody and a few more of my so-called friends. They're fixing to raise hell with me and Letty."

"Some of your chickens coming home to roost, eh?" Ma rumbled a callous laugh. "I take it Lew ain't forgot the time you took the nuts off the back axles of his hack just before he started for the river with his mother-in-law."

"But that was only a little joke," protested Peewee. "This is serious."

"Oh, sure, sure," snickered Ma.

Peewee shuffled his feet uneasily. He said, "It ain't the regular wedding tricks that's getting my goat, doggone 'em!"

"No?"

"They've bought a case of bourbon and a keg of beer over to Big Mike's Saloon," Peewee went on. "They're going to set up a bar in the hotel lobby to serve the guests and spread confusion over the ceremony. I ain't mentioned it before," he continued in a hushed tone, "but Letty's got some funny ideas." Then he hastily added, "It ain't her fault. It's the way her folks fetched her up."

"Well, let's have the worst," said Ma, her mouth growing grim. "Up to now I've never been floored."

"The Boardmans are strict teetotalers," confessed Peewee with about the same manner he would have used in confiding that the whole parcel of them were crazy. "If Letty gets her eye on that liquor and finds it's lubercating her wedding, she won't stop under this bower long enough to say good-bye!"

"Just a minute," requested Ma. "First, I'd admire to know who's going to set up a bar in my lobby! That's out!"

Anyone who knew Ma would have recognized the *I have spoken* note in her comment. A hint of the twinkle returned to Peewee's eyes and his step regained a trace of its cocky swagger as he left the table.

"That takes some of the load off my mind," he said. "Now I have to go out to the big flat and do the ranch chores to hold over tonight. I'll be back in time to meet the stage." He went out and closed the door.

Ma scowled at the spot where he had vanished. "Funny ideas, eh?" she growled to herself. "I'll bet Peewee's folks was just as teetotalish as Letty's, or her paw wouldn't have let Peewee cross the line fence. Prob'ly the poor girl thinks he's unchanged. Oh, my good land!"

She glanced around the room seeking inspiration. Her gaze came to rest on the framed motto of the Golden Rule, worked in red wool, and hanging over the horsehair sofa.

"It's good advice," she acknowledged. "Just the same, if I warn't under obligation to that runt, I'd be sore tempted to allow the boys to fetch in their whisky and beer and let the deceitful little whelp reap the consequences."

She reflected a minute. Her eyes grew moist and she began to hedge. "He's such a good little feller in so many ways, and not a lazy hair in his head," she murmured. "I hadn't oughta jump to conclusions. Better wait and see."

LOCKING the parlor door behind her, Ma went through the lobby into the dining room and back into the kitchen. Sarah Lancing, blond and so large that Ma felt comfortably petite beside her, was

leaning over the cook table. Her large, beet-red face mirrored disgust.

"Lookit this butter," Sarah invited and backed away from it. "I've scalded it and reworked it like you said, and I can't get near enough to the result to touch it with a ten-foot pole."

Ma picked up the butter and held it to her nose.

"Whew!" Hastily she dropped the squeegy mess and joined Sarah. "How anyone can take nice cow's cream and make spoiled soap grease of it is beyond me," she expressed her profound ignorance of the craftsmanship responsible for such an atrocity. "It looks like we'll have no butter for the wedding supper."

On the way back to the lobby, Ma's thinking returned to the way Peewee was trying to forget his sins and insisting that everyone else do the same. It was completely out of character. Of all the people Ma knew, the picture of Peewee with the wind up his neck was the hardest to make jell. Yet if she ever saw anyone worried stiff, Peewee was that one. She couldn't understand it.

Maybe Letty was the wrong girl for him. Ma had known fine boys who had got tangled up with girls who would have ruined the life of a saint. Maybe Peewee was in the clutches of such a hussy, and in so deep he could see no way of escape. Perhaps he wasn't even aware he was in a trap and something down deep was trying to warn him. The way he was worrying indicated that something was haywire.

The fold among Ma's chins that located her mouth tightened into a thin line.

"I'll give this Letty person a careful once-over," she decided. "If anything about her reminds me of a pitchfork with barbed tines, bower or no, I'll bust up Peewee's wedding, if I, personally, have to send over to Big Mike's for the whisky and beer. This is my chance to square myself with Peewee, and I'm going to do it—one way or another!"

With a definite course plotted, Ma felt better. Also, she was reminded that she must get word to Big Mike for the boys to keep their liquid refreshments on his premises till further notice. She glanced out the window and across the street to Big Mike's Saloon which occupied the next corner up the gulch, to see if anyone was in sight she could use as a messenger. Failing there, she went to a front window and looked out.

Big teams hauling wheat to the Columbia River had pulverized the main street until it had a six-inch covering of powdery, yellow earth. A small cloud of this dust moved to the front of the hotel and stopped. As it settled, Tiny Treeble emerged. He was tying the old draft horse he used as a saddler to one of the supporting posts of the hotel balcony. Ma hurried outside.

"You! Tiny!" she shouted. "Get that plug away from there! I'm sick and tired of having scared horses yank them posts loose!"

Tiny, six-feet-seven of good nature, had scraped up enough money to file on a dryland homestead two years before. Since then it had been a mystery how he had kept hanging on with no visible income. He looked down on Ma and his face split in a big kid grin.

"S-s-sh!" he cautioned and laid a sawlog finger to his lips. "Rickets is asleep already. Don't disturb him. He ain't going to hurt the post unless he falls on it. Anyways, I've got something to show you."

"Well, hurry up and get it over with and anchor Rickets some place else before he has a nightmare and moves the hotel."

TINY LOOSENED a burlap wrapped bundle tied to the back of the saddle. He held it gingerly and shifted his weight from one huge foot to the other. "Prob'ly you'll figger I'm teched in the head," he explained sheepishly. "The Hutch boys lent me a cow and I made me some butter."

Ma gave him a startled but searching glance. Tiny's clothing was in rags and about to fall off his mighty frame. But it was clean save for road dust.

"Well," she said, her resigned tone covering a forlorn hope, "unblanket it and back it out of the stall into the light where I can look it over for ringbones and spavins."

Tiny carried the bundle into the lobby and laid it on the desk. He took off the burlap and masses of wet paper he had used to fence out the heat. At last he exposed five rolls of fairly solid butter streaked with white lines of buttermilk.

"I never made no butter before," he apologized anxiously. "But Paw, back in Ohio, won prizes with his butter. I tried to remember and do exactly like he done."

Ma lifted a roll. Cautiously she smelled of it. Disbelief spread over her face as the clean, sweet odor registered. She gouged out a bit and tasted it.

"Tiny!" her voice trembled with emotion. "Next time you work your butter more to get out them buttermilk streaks. Put a mite more salt in it. Yes, and be more careful about straining the carrot juice you're using for coloring. Let's weigh it."

"You mean you're going to buy it?"

"Of course I'm going to buy it, you lunkhead!" Ma spoke harshly to cover her elation over locating a real butter maker. "I'm going to buy every ounce you churn. Furthermore, I'll see that the Hutch boys lend you another cow. And don't let anyone tell you that ability ain't inherited."

Tiny fondled the two silver dollars he received for his butter. He said, "This is the first clinking money I've saw for so long, I hate to put it in my pocket out of sight."

"Go celebrate the event over to Big Mike's," suggested Ma. "There're times when it does a man good to blow off steam."

Tiny shook his head. "I don't drink, and I've had to quit smoking for so long I don't miss it." He glanced down at his ragged clothing. "I ain't been nowhere for months. I want to come to Peewee's wedding. I'm going to buy me a new shirt, a pair of overalls and get me a barber haircut."

"My stars!" Mention of Peewee reminded Ma of what was pending and the many things that remained undone. "Get out of here, Tiny, and give me room according to my strength."

At two o'clock in the afternoon, having caught up with her work for the moment, Ma dropped into a lobby chair. She stuck her feet out ahead of her to give them a rest. "Be a miracle if they hold out," she moaned.

Burdock Smith, a John Day cowman, big both in size and prominence, had just shipped his beef and was having his annual ten day celebration. He edged in the lobby door. Once before on a toot, he had run afoul of Ma. So this time he did not come all the way in.

An ingratiating smile wreathed his mouth. "Ma, where's Peewee?" he asked.

In the light of what Peewee had told her, Ma regarded the question with suspicion. "What do you want with Peewee?" she demanded.

Burdock didn't think he could lie and get away with it. He answered frankly, "The boys want to give him a stag party over to Big Mike's before the stage gets in."

Ma shut her eyes to blot out the vision of Peewee being delivered to his blue ribbon bride on a shutter. That was not going to happen, at least not before she had time to size up Letty. She forgot her tired feet and made a rush for her desk.

When Ma had become widowed, she had holstered a bright, sharp hatchet beneath the lobby desk to substitute for a husband's protection. When things got rugged, hatchet in hand, she dictated the decorum of her hotel without backtalk.

Burdock's previous experience with Ma needed no supplement. He didn't linger, but fled back to Big Mike's to report his failure.

MA STOPPED when she saw Burdock sprinting across the street. Turning back toward her chair, she noticed that the dining room door was inching open for no reason she could think of. Fascinated, she watched. Presently, it opened a full foot and stopped. Peewee's head came into sight. Seeing the coast was clear, he eased into the lobby.

"Good gosh, Ma!" he whispered. "I heard what Burdock said. You've got to hide me. If Letty ever smelt a drink on

me—" He broke off, unable to go on.

"How'd you get in the dining room?" demanded Ma.

"On the way in from my homestead," explained Peewee, "I got to thinking about the boys over to Big Mike's. So I hid my team in Dry Gulch, come the rest of the way on foot and crawled through the window in the dining room."

"Peewee," said Ma, "the more I see of you, the more I'm tempted to throw you to the wolves to check up on whether you've got a backbone or not."

"Think of Letty!" begged Peewee. "If them jaspers get hold of me, Letty'd give one sniff and head back for Indiana on a dead run."

"What's wrong with that? She'll light out anyway, quick as she discovers what kind of a buzzard you've turned into." Ma talked harshly to cover her inner confusion. What ailed Peewee, anyway?

"No, she won't leave," denied Peewee earnestly, "not if we can make her see things as they are and not as we'd all like to have them."

Ma stared at him, trying to understand that last statement.

"Humph!" she commented in complete bafflement.

"Letty's got good sense," continued Peewee.

"So far she ain't showed it, but I hope you're right," Ma said. "There ought to be at least one brain in every family." She held out the key to the parlor door. "Lock yourself in with the bower until stage time. After that you can shift for yourself."

"Thanks, Ma," said Peewee gratefully. "I knew I could depend on you."

Ma shrugged and returned to her chair to rest her tired feet some more. Watching out the window, she saw Burdock gather up all the available loafers and carefully post them around the hotel. Peewee hadn't got in from the big flat a minute too soon nor a whit too secretly.

The pleasure Ma got out of Burdock's futile activity gave her the necessary energy to finish up a few odds and ends. Shouts up the street announced the arrival of the stage. She went to the parlor and summoned Peewee.

After doing nothing but worrying for two hours, Peewee was now in a state of near collapse.

"Them roughnecks," he predicted darkly, "will grab me the second I step out to meet the stage."

"No they won't," reassured Ma. "I've took precautions. You hustle Letty right into the parlor. That's a good place for her to discover how you've slid down hill since she saw you last. Soon's it's over, you'll likely join the boys at Big Mike's on your own hook."

A CROWD of men, headed by Burdock Smith and Lew Peabody, swarmed under the balcony. Hank Simons, the lanky stage driver, with his usual flourish, drew his six-horse team to a halt at an exact spot in front of the hotel.

Ma came out the lobby door. A wide lane magically opened as the rays of the sun reflected on the bright hatchet in her hand. Behind her, Sarah, the long kitchen

## Cowboys On and Off

By S. OMAR BARKER

*It's a well-known Western saying,*
*And a true one too, of course,*
*That you always know a cowboy*
*By the way he mounts a horse.*

*It's also true that cowpokes*
*Can, a heap of times, be knowed*
*By the way they make their landings*
*When they happen to get throwed!*

range poker gripped in her huge paw, lumbered to the down gulch end of the stage. Jessie Carter, the six-foot, sandy-haired waitress and laundress, held a heavy brass dinner horn under one muscular arm. She took the upper gulch end of the stage.

The concord coach rocked on its leather slings. The door opened. Out backed two drummers, each trying to assist the slender girl who followed them. She lifted a billowing skirt until the tip of a fashionable, high-buttoned kid shoe appeared. She sort of flowed to the walk under the balcony.

His eyes dulled by the murky light of certain disaster, Peewee came out of the hotel and glanced around furtively.

*"John!"* There was a swish. The two drummers gazed sadly at each other. The girl was in Peewee's arms, identifying who she meant by *John* to a populace that had never heard the runt called anything but Peewee. Both the discovery and the clinch were roundly cheered.

Ma hid the hatchet as best she could in the folds of her voluminous skirt. She gave the bride a cold, keen appraisal.

Letty Boardman was a nice size for Peewee. With her soft, light gold hair, smooth cheeks and red lips she was real pretty. Her traveling cape breezed back when her arms went out to Peewee, and revealed a tight-waisted basque with modish sleeves. At least her devotion to temperance did not prevent her from recognizing she had a figure, or keep her from learning how to dress it.

Ma liked the expression in the clear blue eyes. But her most critical inspection centered on the firm little chin and the strong nose. Her conjured-up hostility melted away and she nodded emphatically.

Letty had passed the preliminary examination. Yet Ma's approving judgment had left her more confused than ever. If it wasn't Letty's fault, what in time was grinding Pewee to make him as jumpy as a drop of water in a hot greased skillet?

Peewee, realizing that every second he lingered on the walk was an extra snap of his fingers under the nose of calamity, hurried Letty through the lobby into the parlor.

Sarah, with the poker, began walking beat before the parlor window. Ma, in the lobby, guaranteed that no one would disturb the lovers from that direction.

Strain her ears as she would, Ma couldn't hear what was being said in the parlor. But she could gather a lot from the pitch of the voices. She was braced and ready when the parlor door flew open and Letty stood there, throwing off flame and sparks.

"Mrs. Emory! Come in here a minute!" Her manner and tone defied argument.

Ma went in and closed the door. She smiled placatingly at the angry girl. "Everyone calls me Ma," she said. "You do the same, dear."

Letty gave no sign she appreciated the honor.

"John wrote me that there was no Methodist church in Summit City. But he didn't tell me there was no church of any kind for us to be married in!"

Letty was both tragic and accusing. She pointed a scornful finger at the bower. "John says we're to be married under that mess of brush and weeds—not even any regular flowers! And me with an ivory satin wedding gown, veil and everything!"

Ma counted five slowly. "Letty," she said, "if you knew the miles of canyon bottoms Peewee tramped to find that brush and them weeds, and the way him and me slaved on that bower, you'd think it was right pretty."

"Doesn't anyone in this shiftless, Godless country have flowers in their gardens?" demanded Letty.

"Come here." Gently Ma took Letty by the arm and led her to a window. "See that pump in the middle of the street? That's the only water within five miles of here. And it doesn't rain for weeks at a stretch. It takes water to raise flowers."

"But out on the farms," protested Letty. "Surely flowers grow in the farm gardens. Haven't you any flowers in your garden, John?"

"Well no, not yet." was Peewee's reluctant admission. "I have to haul all the water I use on the ranch from Thirty-mile Creek, in a tank wagon. However, there is a moist spot close to the house.

I'll see if I can't dig a well there. Then we can have flowers."

LETTY gave him a withering look and turned her back on him. "No water! No gardens! No churches! But pulenty of rum!" she condemned the country item by item. "I've got a good notion to go right back home."

Panic leaped into Peewee's eyes. He opened his mouth to plead, but all he said was, "Ouch!"

Ma, her long skirt concealing the act, had brought her heel down on his toes. She did it partly to keep him from further messing up the situation, and partly because it made her feel better.

"Yes, Letty," she agreed, "it might be better. This is a new country and no place for the weak. Now's your time to fold up and go back where it's soft and easy."

Letty glared. She squared off for battle, caught herself and stood silent while cross emotions tugged at her face. Finally she said, "Take me to my room. I want to think about this."

Ma took Letty up the stairs to number eight, which had been reserved for her. Then Ma returned to the parlor where Peewee was slumped on the horsehair sofa. She eyed him severely.

"Peewee," she said, "there's something mighty peculiar about this. How come Letty knows so little about this country? Don't you know better'n to dunk a pampered girl into the likes of this without no preparation?"

"I figger I had plenty reason," said Peewee. "Letty's folks wanted her to marry a neighbor with a big farm next to theirs. The only way I could get a farm and keep in the running was to come out here and homestead one. I was afraid if I wrote her how tough everything was, she'd get scared and let her folks persuade her into marrying the jasper next door. And, doggone it, I'm crazy about her."

Ma let out a gusty sigh of relief. "Well, why didn't you tell me this before now?" she demanded. "You led me to think you was just a plain, ornery weasel. While all the time, all you was was just dumb. I wonder why 'tis that otherwise bright and upright men figger they've got to put on sheeps' clothing and go *Bah! Bah!* in order to impress a girl. They don't fool nobody but theirselves."

"I done what I thought was best," muttered Peewee defensively.

"It was a mighty poor effort," evaluated Ma. "Didn't you ever take a good look at Letty, or is love actually blind, like is claimed? That chin of Letty's ain't scared of this country or anything it's likely to produce. You're the disappointment. Unless I'm more mistaken than I've ever been in my life, when Letty said she'd marry you, she meant it. If necessary, she'd have worked her family and the candidate next door into a carpet for her and you to walk on to reach the altar. And look at the way you've treated her. You poor goop, I've a notion to hit you myself!"

"Maybe you're right," admitted Peewee. "Anyway, the fat is in the fire. The question is, what to do about it?"

"For one thing, you can keep your mouth shut and let me straighten out the kinks," said Ma. On that note, she returned to the lobby.

Ma gave Letty time to stew in her troubles and sort of get used to having them around. Then she took a tray with tea, toast and some of her precious wild crab-apple jelly to number eight. Letty received her with unbending hostility.

"It's too bad you didn't have no early settlers among your ancestors, Letty," sympathized Ma. "It's a thing that runs in the blood of sturdy stock." Peewee had told her that Letty's grandparents were among Indiana's noted pioneers.

"I'll have you know that my grandfather and grandmother were among the first settlers of Indiana!" Letty set Ma straight with extreme heat. "They fought the Indians and developed the country."

"Excuse me," apologized Ma, "but did your granpaw and granmaw build their church before or after they fought the Injuns?"

"It was afterwards." The words came slowly and Letty gave Ma a queer look.

"I bet you'd have built the church first,"

said Ma with such conviction Letty couldn't bring herself to deny it until it was too late. Ma was already on her way back to the lobby. Shrewdly, she had thrown up a dust screen to cloud the real issue.

Seated behind her desk, Ma waited for Letty to digest the thought left with her. Ma was not too worried. She had confidence in her judgment of Letty. Plainly the girl revered her grandparents. That, plus an urge to emulate them, with an added dash of youthful romanticism, Ma thought would be sufficient to make her forgive Peewee for his mistake of treating her like a child incapable of understanding.

AT THE sunset hour, Ma got Peewee from the parlor and called at number eight. "No use staying cooped up here, Letty, even if you have decided to scurry home," she said. "Come out and look around." She led the way out the hall door to the top of the balcony which afforded a fine view of the daily dry country miracle.

The west was flaming with holy splendor. There were unbelievable reds and yellows shot with gold. Even the drab, weathered double line of false-fronted business houses on either side of the gulch took on a hint of glamour.

"Look, Letty," commanded Ma. "Then tell me again this country is Godless."

Letty was silent a long time. She dropped her eyes and pretended to be watching the many ranch hacks rolling into town.

Ma said, "Folks are beginning to arrive for the wedding, Letty. Hadn't you better unpack your wedding dress and make sure there are no wrinkles that need pressing out?"

"I suppose I might as well," agreed Letty.

"Then you're going to stay!" Peewee almost shouted.

"Of course she's going to stay. What do you think she come all the way out here for?" Ma gave him a severe warning look. "Ain't that Reverend Whipple tying his buckboard team to the hitchrail in front of Dudley's store?" She adroitly changed the subject before Peewee could manage to get Letty's attention refocused on his shortcomings.

The angular, loose-built minister was wearing a long, linen duster. He took it off, carefully folded it and placed it under the buckboard seat cushion. His shiny old Prince Albert coat flapping, he started diagonally across the street toward the hotel.

"Oh, them miserable coyotes!" wailed Peewee. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Ma gave a startled look and wondered why she hadn't thought of it herself. Burdock Smith, Lew Peabody and Nate Jennings, along with a dozen others, were closing around the Reverend Whipple. Their intent was plain. Set back on their heels in their efforts to lay hands on Peewee, they were grabbing the minister to hold as a hostage till Peewee gave himself up. Even as those on the balcony looked on helplessly, hard, secular fingers seized the minister.

Ma's first impulse was to go right down and take the minister away from the boys. An instant's reflection convinced her that it would be a decidedly unpopular thing to do. Besides, she had a hunch that now the die was cast and the chips down, Letty would team right up with Peewee to take care of this and any other problem that arose in the future. She settled back and waited.

"Those horrid men have actually laid hands on the minister!" gasped Letty. "Where's the police?"

"Nate Jennings, the town marshal?" asked Ma. "That's him a-hold of Reverend Whipple's right arm."

"What'll we do?" Peewee was frantic.

"It's yours and Letty's wedding," reminded Ma. "I never expect to need a preacher but once more."

"They're dragging the minister to that saloon!" Letty stabbed a furious finger at Big Mike's.

Ma nodded. "Looks like it," she agreed cheerfully.

"John Williams!" Letty turned on Peewee. "You go right down and make them stop. I won't have it! I never saw anything like it!"

"You mean—" Peewee was not quite caught up with Letty.

"Go!" Beaming happily, Ma gave him a shove.

PEEWEE dashed into the upper hall and scudded down the stairs, peeling off his coat as he ran. He came out of the lobby head lowered, legs driving. His hard, compact body hit the men ringed around Reverend Whipple with such force his rush carried him to the minister. He tore Jennings from his hold and flung him aside. Then he tried to yank Reverend Whipple away from Burdock Smith, who gripped the other arm.

The delighted crowd formed a ring while Peewee and Burdock pulled and heaved. There was a loud tearing sound. Whipple's old Prince Albert couldn't stand the strain. It ripped from tail to collar.

Peewee blamed Burdock for the sacrilege. He said something that might have been profanity if it could have been heard above the clamor.

Up on the balcony, the bride shrieked something at Peewee that was lost in the tumult below. But Ma heard it and her smile broadened. She had been right. Letty was a ringtailed fighter. What Letty'd said was, "Hit him, John! Hit him!"

Peewee couldn't possibly have heard the advice, but he acted as though he had. He swunk a swishing right to Burdock's jaw, knocking the cowman loose from his grip.

Reverend Whipple made a determined attempt to flee to the hotel. The ring of men closed and held him fast. Then Burdock hit Peewee an open-handed cuff that sat him in the dust.

Up on the balcony, Letty was gripping the rail. She shouted into a sudden lull, "Get up and fight him, John! What that big bully needs is a good thrashing!"

Lew Peabody delightedly seized on the ripe opportunity.

"Let Burdock and Peewee fight it out. The winner to get the minister," he yelled.

Just as sure as Lew as to what the outcome would be, the crowd roared joyous approval.

It is doubtful if Peewee heard any of it. He did know Letty had sent him to rescue Reverend Whipple. He rose from the ground and sailed through the air to land two hard punches on the cowman.

Burdock roared half in pain and half in praise of the unexpected power of the blows. In return he hit Peewee a clip that knocked him against one of the men forming the ring so hard they both went down.

It was a strange fight. The harder and farther Burdock knocked him, the faster and more determined Peewee returned to the battle. He didn't dare lose.

Peewee was small, but he was strong and tough. He began to wear through the patience of the big cowman. Finally Peewee landed a punch that knocked Burdock down.

Up to this time, Burdock hadn't been sore. That last blow hurt his pride. As he sat shaking off the effects, he came to the conclusion that Peewee was playing too rough.

Ma watched the progress of the fight with a calculating eye. It was by no means the first she had witnessed. She was well aware that for all his courage, Peewee stood no chance with Burdock, once the big cowman began to bear down.

FOR SOME minutes she had been keeping an eye on Tiny Treeble. In his new shirt and overalls and barber haircut, he towered head and majestic shoulders above the others. He was enjoying himself as only one who had been starved to the limits of a giant capacity could.

"Tiny!" she bawled down at him.

Tiny looked up and grinned.

"Tiny, you go get Peewee and Reverend Whipple and fetch 'em into the hotel!" she ordered.

"Not me," he refused. "Let Peewee and Burdock settle it. This is the most fun I've had for an age."

"If you expect to sell me another pound of butter, get going!"

Tiny couldn't afford to toss away the only source of regular income he had discovered in two years of struggle, and Ma knew it. She smiled at the protest on his face as he started to obey.

"I hate to bust this up, fellers," he growled, "but I've got my tail caught in

the door." He parted the ring with a swimming motion of his huge arms. Reaching Reverend Whipple, he freed the minister with a brush of his hand.

Tucking the parson under one arm, he reached out the other hand, caught Peewee by the back of his belt and lifted him from his feet. Carrying him like a valise, he stalked into the hotel. No one even tried to stop him. Judged on its merits, it was a wonderful ending to super entertainment. The crowd yelled approval. . . .

It was ten o'clock before the damage could be somewhat repaired, and the bride and groom stood beneath the bower. The groom was considerably battered as was Burdock Smith who insisted on acting as best man. But everyone was happy. Not one of them had ever attended such a splendid wedding.

As usual, most of the attention was centered on the bride. In her ivory satin dress and flowing veil, she stood out like a lovely painting in a tarnished frame.

Ma, appropriately gowned in a lace dress which had been made over with sleeves as big as the bride's own, stood under the vivid, enlarged photograph of Pa Emory. Around her crowded excited homestead wives, eager to welcome the new addition to the pioneer cult of Eastern Oregon. Out under the balcony, there was a constant milling as men struggled for seeing positions at the windows.

As the ceremony droned on, Ma nodded her head in agreement with each firm response. This was her wedding almost as much as it was the wedding of the pair under the bower. Single handedly she had snatched Peewee back from the pit, which, with the stupidity of a man in love, he had dug for himself. She had rescued a marriage anyone could see was a natural.

Her exploit filled her with deep satisfaction. Her chins quivered with emotion. Furthermore, if this didn't cancel out her debt of honor, Ma would admire to know what it would take.

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*Coming up in the next issue*

## Neighbor Trouble

***She Had to Wait There, a Prisoner in the Old Ranch House, While Three Men With Murder in Their Hearts Stalked the Ranger She Loved***

**Complete Magazine-Length Novel**

**By ELSA BARKER**

## Inch-Along Express

***No Matter How Hard He Pushed the Train Through the Mountains, He'd Probably Still Lose the Contract—and the Luscious Blonde***

**A Novelette**

**By GIFF CHESHIRE**

## A Plumb Fine Dream

***Lanyard Could Dream About Settling Down With a Girl Like Martha. But How Long Would It Last—Before His Hunters Smoked Him Down?***

**A Short Story**

**By GARDNER F. FOX**

*Joe gripped his heavy rifle, his hands clammy*

# Schooled in Wilderness

## By Ferris Weddle

THE BOY stood before the bearded mountain man, assured and firm as he announced, "My name, sir, is Joseph L. Meek. I want to go to the Rocky Mountains with your company."

William Sublette of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company looked at the tall, darkly handsome youth and shook his head. "You're mighty young to want to die, lad, and you probably would up there."

"I'm eighteen, sir, and I reckon if I have to die, I can do it like a man."

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*The true story of Joseph Meek, a legend among the mountain men who challenged the untamed Northwest!*

For a moment Sublette said nothing. Then he grinned and put out his hand to Joe Meek. "I think you're right, son. Welcome to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company."

William Sublette's words were the beginning of a career that was to make Joseph Meek a legend among the men who challenged the dangers of the Northwest wilderness—the mountain men.

Trapper, hunter, scout, guide, Indian fighter, Oregon pioneer, legislator, sheriff and U.S. Marshal—all these titles make up the Meek legend. But it is his early life as a trapper and his romance with a lovely Shoshone Indian girl that embodies all the color and drama one associates with the unexplored country of the fur trader and trapper.

The son of a fairly wealthy Virginia family, Meek tired of plantation life and school. So, one day he hit his school teacher over the head with the paddle that was used too frequently on the reluctant student, and headed for St. Louis. This bustling frontier town was the outfitting and recruiting point for many of the fur companies. It was here that he joined Sublette's Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

If he regretted his decision to become a mountain man, Joe Meek never admitted it. The wilderness became his school, and it was a rough school from the first. The Sublette company left St. Louis in March of 1829, and all across Missouri the snow, sleet and rain pounded the group of sixty men.

As a greenhorn, young Joe was made a camp-tender, which meant that he arose, shivering, at four o'clock each morning to help feed the stock and build campfires. It was dull, miserable work. But not for long.

As the company left Independence and were traveling in the flat prairie country between Arkansas and Platte Rivers, Joe saw his first "wild" Indians, and the sight made him shiver.

There they were, some thousand of them, in full war dress, streaming across the prairie. When they sighted the small band of trappers, the Indian leaders whipped their ponies into a run, and the silence was broken by piercing war whoops, and the pounding of hoofs. Captain Sublette quickly gave orders for the trappers to set up a line of defense.

"And don't fire until I give the signal!" the Captain ordered sternly. "Every shot must count, or we all die."

Young Joe gripped his heavy rifle, and he noted that his hands were clammy. Right then the peaceful plantation would have looked more than welcome.

ON THE redmen thundered, and then about one hundred yards away, the leaders pulled up, and a chief in full headdress leaped from his pony's back and laid his rifle on the ground, making peace signs. A sigh of relief passed down the line of trappers.

"Shoot at the first hostile move," Sublette said as he walked forward to have a powow with the chief.

Sublette and the Indian leaders talked and smoked the peace pipe. It seemed that the Indians would be satisfied if the trappers would give them some presents. Captain Sublette agreed to this. Young Joe was not disappointed. A dead man couldn't become a mountain man!

In the year that followed, however, as Joe learned the art of trapping for beaver, he also learned the art of Indian fighting. His first experience was one that he never forgot.

In November of 1830, Meek's company was encamped on the Gallatin Fork of the Missouri River, just over a mountain range from the Yellowstone River. The trappers, fatigued after a long, cold march, were relaxing in camp and caught almost unaware when the shout came, "Injuns!"

The attackers were Blackfeet, the worst enemies the trappers had in the Rocky Mountains. Captain Sublette, with most of the company, except two men who were killed at the outset, escaped, with the Blackfeet in pursuit. Joe, however, was cut off from the main group, and fled into the mountains overlooking the Yellowstone. His escape was not noticed by the Blackfeet.

Alone, he hid in the timber with just his mule, a blanket and his rifle. A great feeling of desolation held him as the intense silence revealed just how alone he truly was. He dared not try to follow the company, for the Blackfeet would be on the trail and looking for stragglers. He had no food, and he dared not try shoot any game.

Hiding his mule in a clump of brush, he labored his way to the top of the divide, hoping to figure out a way to rejoin the company. He gasped as he reached the top, for the world he saw was alien, forboding.

At the bottom rolled the Yellowstone. To the West twisted the mighty Snake. And to the north the Missouri River wound among the mountain ranges that piled one on another. Throughout the country lurked hostile redmen. A man, alone, did not have much of a chance for his life. And nineteen-year-old Joe Meek, knowing this, did not try to stop the tears that rolled down his cheeks.

Then, having decided to head southeast toward friendly Crow Indian country, he got his mule and traveled all that night. The cold was bitter, biting, but he dared not light a fire. The second day he had to leave his mule which could no longer travel in the rugged country. With only his blanket and rifle, he continued without food until the third day when he managed to shoot a mountain sheep.

On the fourth day, Joe made a discovery that furnished material for many a campfire yarn—some of the bubbling hot springs of the Yellowstone country. The steam and vapor hissed, rolling into the frosty air, as Joe finally ventured near, delighted with the warmth. If this was hell, he thought with his habitual grin, it was a far better climate than the one he had left.

Absorbed in the strange place, he was jerked rudely back to reality by two rifle shots and ear-splitting yells. He grabbed his rifle, then sighed with relief as two riders came into view. They were trappers from Sublette's company, sent to search for him.

"By damn, it's old Joe!" one of the riders yelled.

Young Joe Meek felt a glow inside him. A mountain man did not use the term "old" unless you had made good. He was in—a mountain man!

IN THE following four years, his stature as a trapper and as a man grew. The four years had been eventful, shared with such famed mountain men as Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, Jed Smith and many others. There had been countless skirmishes with the Indians and with bears. There had been periods of plenty, and times when he almost froze and starved.

But through it all Meek never lost the waggish sense of humor that made him liked in a Jackson Hole rendezvous or in a Washington, D. C. drawing room. He loved a practical joke, as did most mountain men, and on one occasion he saved his life and three others because of this.

Under the command of Jim Bridger at the time, Meek, two Shawnee trappers and another man were heading into Crow country to trap on a tributary of the Yellowstone. Joe was in the lead when he rode into a pass called Pryor's Gap.

His exuberant spirit was needing some exercise, so abruptly he destroyed the mountain stillness with a blood-curdling yell and raced his mule toward the others who promptly turned and fled, sure that Meek had sighted Indians. Meek, laughing with great joy between whoops, suddenly stopped laughing—for a war party of Crows had streamed out of the pass!

With such a head start, the trappers managed to outrun the war party which had been waiting in ambush, and made it back to the main camp.

At another time, the joke was on Meek. The following year, Meek and a party were out hunting buffalo in the Yellowstone area, when they ran into an Indian ambush. As the redmen fired, the trappers wheeled their mules to flee, not knowing how big the war party was. But the mule Meek was riding balked!

Meek pleaded with the mule, beat it over the head, while the bullets whistled past him. He noted that the war party was a small one. His companions were leaving him, and desperately he called out to them

to stop and fight. But apparently they did not hear him, or realize his predicament.

The gleeful warriors understood his problem and stopped shooting, dashing toward him. One paint-smeared brave tried to grab the mule's bridle, and things happened! The mule distinctly disliked the smell of the redmen, and with a snort it bolted, almost upsetting Meek.

The surprised Indians yelled, but before they could start shooting at the runaway, the mule was too far, leaping over logs and ravines as though they did not exist. Soon Meek met the others, and as he passed one trapper, the fellow laughed and shouted at him.

"Hey, Meek, let's stop and fight!"

"Hell, no, there're thousands of them!" Meek roared back.

The fact was he couldn't have stopped the mule had he wanted to!

LIKE MOST mountain men, romance was not unknown in Meek's rugged mountain existence, although he related few of his amorous adventures in later life. It is known that he married three different Indian girls, probably by tribal ritual. But the important woman in his life was the Shoshone girl, Umentucken, the Mountain Lamb.

He met the Mountain Lamb in 1832 in a way that would satisfy even the most romantic-minded person. Bridger and Milton Sublette, brother of William Sublette, were in charge of Meek's party which was trapping on the Bear River in what is now Utah.

During a quarrel with an Indian who was with the party, Milton Sublette was critically stabbed. While the main party went on toward the Snake River country, Meek was elected to stay with Sublette. No one expected the man to live.

Sublette lived, however, and for forty days and nights, Meek cared for him. Later, they set out to join the main party, and on a fork of the Green River they ran into a party of hostile Snake, or Shoshone Indians. To save themselves, the trappers rode into the Indian encampment and entered the medicine lodge where they knew they'd be safe for a while.

Soon the lodge was filled with warriors and headmen, who discussed the fate of the two white men. The majority were for killing them, but one old chief named Gotia wanted to free them. That evening, while the campfires burned high and the warriors leaped to the war drums and chants of the older warriors and women, Chief Gotia caused a disturbance by stampeding the camp's horses. During the confusion, he led the captives to two horses tied in some willows.

The slender, dark, soft-eyed girl who held the horses was the Mountain Lamb. Both men, intrigued by her beauty, would have liked to have lingered, but a raising of angry voices in the camp revealed that their escape had been discovered.

Joe Meek did not forget the Mountain Lamb, nor did Milton Sublette. Sublette went back to the Indian camp and married her. Meek smiled and congratulated his friend, but he could not forget the Mountain Lamb.

THE FOLLOWING January, Meek saved the girl and her child from freezing. Bridger's party had camped in the forks of the Snake River, but because of the scarcity of game, the party moved to the Portneuf River junction.

Meek, with several others, remained behind to gather up some strayed stock, and later they started out in a howling blizzard. As Meek rode with head lowered against the stinging wind, he heard his name called, and looked up to see Umentucken off the trail, huddled up against her horse.

She had become separated from the main party. Shivering, she held her baby close, her eyes big and soft on his face.

"I'm not afraid for myself, Joseph," she said in the Shoshone tongue. "But the little one is very cold."

Without hesitation, Joe Meek took off his blanket capote, which was the only covering he had on his upper body, and wrapped it around her and the baby. He put her on her horse.

"Now, do not stop until you reach the

others," he said, slapping her horse on the rump.

A smile of gratitude on her face, the Mountain Lamb disappeared into the swirling snow. Meek worked his arms vigorously and beat his chest to keep up the circulation as he hurried the loose stock after the girl. But somehow, he didn't mind the cold so much.

Fate took a hand in this romance, in 1835, when Milton Sublette had to go East to get surgical aid for a severe leg wound he received in an Indian battle. He never returned. Mountain Lamb, left alone with a child, turned to Joe Meek, whom she had always favored with more than passing interest.

But if fate had been kindly this once, the next turn of the cards was not so kind, for Meek and the Mountain Lamb had only one year together. But it was a gay, happy year. Meek dressed her in finery that no other trapper's wife could equal—a blue broadcloth skirt, a bodice and leggins of red cloth, a silk handkerchief to cover her long braids and fancy, embroidered moccasins.

Her dapple grey horse had cost the trapper three hundred dollars, and the saddle and other equipment, around one-hundred and fifty. She looked and acted the queen that she was.

Gentle as she could be, the Indian girl, like all those of her race, could take care of herself when her man was gone for weeks or months on hunting or trapping trips. On one occasion she held a pistol at the head of an infuriated Irish trapper who thought she had turned loose some Ute Indian prisoners he had purchased as slaves. He planned to beat her, but the pistol changed his mind.

On other occasions, the Mountain Lamb belied her name by taking part in Indian battles alongside her husband. It was in a melee with the Bannack Indians that a stray bullet hit Umentucken, the Mountain Lamb, and killed her. Meek, heartbroken and furious, fought the Bannacks all that day along with the other angry trappers. The Mountain Lamb's death was avenged before long.

It was not until three years later that Meek married again, a Nez Percé girl who, being homesick for her people, left him with a baby girl and went back to her people. This child was one of the many victims of the Whitman massacre in 1847. Meek's third wife was also a Nez Percé woman, and became the mother of seven children. They became stable citizens of the Oregon country, for when the fur business played out, many of the mountain men went to the rich Oregon country to pioneer, bringing their native wives.

So it was that Joseph L. Meek started a new adventure in living, across the continent from where he had been born.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

*MOVIE NEWS COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE!*

*A Review of*

**FORT WORTH**

*Warner Bros. Production Starring*

*Randolph Scott*

**and**

*A Word-and-Picture Profile of Western Player*

**PAT BUTTRAM**

*"Herbert," she said, "climb over that fence and tell me what you see"*

# SPARK OF GENIUS

***By Ben Frank***

NO ONE ever suspected that Knucklehead Nolte had a spark of genius in him. Especially Knucklehead himself. And like as not, if he hadn't got his ire aroused one Saturday night, that spark would never have been fanned into flame, and he would've gone on the rest of his life, working his muscles and resting his brain and never getting no-place fast.

Not that a man shouldn't use his muscles, but all beef and no brains wasn't what Cathy Bell wanted, and Knucklehead had to find it out the hard way.

At the end of a week of pick-and-shoveling, Knucklehead reckoned he'd dug enough post holes to reach from here to China if they were stacked up end to end, and he was tired enough to go to bed and stay there for a month of Sundays. But who cared? Not him, with Saturday night and

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***A CRACKED HEAD, a cracked boulder, an incentive like Cathy—***

***what more did Knucklehead need to bring out his hidden talent?***

Cathy just a jump and a holler ahead of him.

Whistling, he pulled to a stop between old man Bell's house and the horse barn, and eased down from the wagon, a skinny six-footer with a great shock of red hair and a pair of honest blue eyes boxed in by high cheek bones and a long nose.

He'd been working on old man Bell's Lazy B for six months, and from the very first had taken a shine to the old man's daughter, who was the first rose of summer, or a breath of cool air on a hot day, or cream on your strawberries, or any of a dozen other good things a brain-rester like Knucklehead might think of without too much effort.

The team taken care of, he bow-legged it to the cookshack.

"What's the latest news?" he asked Ching Ling, the cook.

Ching grinned toothlessly. "Nothing much. Only Herbert he come see Miss Cathy two, three times."

Right then, Knucklehead lost his appetite. Not only was Herbert Hansen a good-looking gent, but he also drove a five-hundred-dollar span of dapple-greys hitched to a very slick, rubber-tired buggy, worked in his old man's bank and had more money to spend than a goat has smells.

Worried, Knucklehead left the cookshack, took a dip in the horse tank, put on clean clothes and strode to the Lazy B ranch house.

Prettier than a barbershop calendar, Cathy sat on the front porch steps in a strip of moonlight, all dressed up, it seemed, and no place to go. Knucklehead's heart began to hammer so hard that he thought it would likely bust a rib.

"Hi," he managed to get out without choking to death.

"Oh, it's you," she said with no show of excitement.

"Yep," he said. "And since it's me, we could saddle up and ride to Dusty-Oven and—"

"William—" Cathy was the only person in Wide-Loop County who called him by his right name— "sit down. I want to have a little talk with you."

HE EASED down on the steps and, looking at her, wondered vaguely how so much loveliness could be rolled up in such a small package. Five-feet-two or three, with honey-gold hair and blue eyes.

"You're not a bad guy," she said. "In fact, you're pretty nice and I've grown awfully fond of you. But—well, how much money have you in the bank?"

"Bank?" Knucklehead felt a touch of uneasiness. "I don't trust banks much. You see—"

"How much?"

"None. But I got fifty dollars back pay coming."

She sighed. "Money isn't everything, of course, but I've been doing some serious thinking this week. Perhaps if you had a few thousand saved up, enough for us to buy a little place and—oh, what's the use!"

She stood and looked sadly down at him. "The trouble with you, you're all beef and no brains." Then, before he could recover from the blow, she added, "Herbert is taking me to the dance in Dusty-Oven. Good night, William."

The next thing Knucklehead knew, he was going no place in particular, deeply hurt and somewhat wrathful. A few thousand dollars! Cathy must have stood in the sun bareheaded too long today.

On second thought, he knew who was to blame for all this. Herbert Hansen. Likely if Knucklehead hadn't been so stunned by the sudden turn of events, he would have waylaid Herbert and knocked him loose from his pretty face. But as it was, he climbed to the top rail of the corral fence, rolled a smoke and began to limber up his unused brain.

Come to think of it, Cathy was right. Beef and no brains. Here he was, twenty-five and he'd never gotten around to making plans for the future. Just coasted along. Only a dumb chick would risk marrying a hombre like him, and Cathy was not dumb. Pretty, all right, but not dumb.

However, sitting there stirring up his brain, he couldn't figure how a man could get three or four thousand dollars ahead, working on the Lazy B at forty dollars a

month. So there was just one thing to do—seek his fortune elsewhere. Of course, doing that would leave the field wide open for Herbert. But as it was, Herbert seemed to have the inside swing anyway.

Cussing himself for being so slow on the up-take, Knucklehead eased down off the fence and went to the house again, this time to the back door to round up old man Bell.

He found Bell in the room the oldster used for an office, smoking his pipe and playing himself a game of checkers.

"Set down, son," Bell said, "and play me a game."

Knucklehead shook his head. "Come for my back pay. Reckon it's time I was moving on."

Bell didn't like the idea of losing a good worker like Knucklehead. "I been thinking about raising you to fifty a month," he said hopefully.

Again the ranny shook his head, sadly, and the old man demanded an explanation and got it.

"So Cathy's been building a fire under you," he growled. "In a way, she's right about that beef and no brains business. But if a man ain't got no brains, he can't use—"

"Mr. Bell," Knucklehead said with dignity, "Just give me my back pay and say no more."

BELL BEGAN counting out the money. "Just between you and me," he muttered, "I ain't much stuck on having Herbert Hansen for a son-in-law. But when a girl like Cathy makes up her mind—Well, Knucklehead, I hope you get that brain of yours limbered up and figure how to tie a knot in Herbert's lariat before he gets his loop on Cathy for sure."

"Me, too," Knucklehead said, stuffing the fifty into a pocket.

"Don't do nothing desperate, like robbing a train, or rustling cattle," the old man warned. "Cathy wouldn't stand for that. And don't take it outa Herbert's tender hide. You could lick him with one hand tied behind your back, but if you did, she'd feel sorry for him and would marry him for sure. What you got to do is outsmart him."

Sighing deeply, Knucklehead shook hands with the old man and left the house. Fifteen minutes later, he rode from the Lazy B on his twenty-dollar pinto, with all his worldly goods—which consisted of a worn saddle, a change of clothes, two moth-eaten blankets and the fifty dollars back pay.

He hadn't gone farther than Hog-Leg Canyon when he got so drowsy he caught himself falling out of the saddle, so he holed up and slept till sunup. Morning found him hungrier than a grizzly in early spring and with nothing to eat. He was wondering if he could hold out until he reached Dusty-Oven, or should he take a side-trail to some ranch and get himself a hand-out, when he heard the clatter of horses.

Lifting his eyes, he recognized the three riders approaching. They were known collectively as "them trifling Sholtz brothers," but from the oldest to the youngest they answered to the names of Slab, Soup and Sugar.

They reigned up. Slab unloaded a stream of tobacco juice, Soup scratched his uncombed head and Sugar opened his mouth and spoke:

"How come you ain't digging post holes, Knucklehead?"

Knucklehead had little love for the Sholtz brothers, but he was one against three. He smiled pleasantly and informed them that he had quit his job.

"Why?" Soup demanded.

"Ever stop to think how long it would take a man to save three thousand dollars at cowboy wages?"

Soup hadn't, and now the very thought of so much money made him slightly dizzy.

"If I was in a hurry for three thousand dollars," Sugar muttered, "I'd get me a gold mine."

"Ole One-eye Elmer has got a gold mine," Soup observed sourly, "and he ain't got no three thousand smackers."

"The trouble is," Slab said, "One-Eye's mine ain't got no gold in it."

"Heard One-Eye is wanting to sell out," Soup said.

"Only a idiot would buy a gold mine that ain't got no gold in it," Slab said. "Giddap."

IN THOUGHTFUL silence, Knucklehead watched the Sholtz brothers ride away. He'd plumb forgot about One-Eye Elmer's claim, which was not far from Hog-Leg Canyon. Maybe, he reasoned, if he'd pay the old prospector a friendly visit, he could wrangle some breakfast from him. Whistling softly, he saddled up and headed toward Beaver Creek, where One-Eye had staked out his worthless claim some years before.

One-Eye dozed in the shade of a huge, cracked granite boulder which adorned the narrow strip of bare ground in front of his one-room shack. Coming to, he squinted up at Knucklehead and said, "Light and set awhile."

Knucklehead eased to the ground and squatted in the shade beside One-Eye, wondering the best way to approach the whiskered old coot about breakfast. Absently he squinted into the black crack in the boulder.

"Hear you're aiming to sell out," he said conversationally.

One-Eye nodded. "Lock, stock and barrel. Fifty dollars for the whole works. Cabin, tools, muzzle-loader and Felicia."

"Felicia?"

"My pack-mule."

Now, Knucklehead didn't want One-Eye's outfit anymore than he wanted pneumonia, but just to keep the ball rolling and maybe get himself something to eat, he said, "Might give you twenty-five."

The next thing Knucklehead knew, he was sole owner of a claim, cabin and mule, and One-Eye Elmer was walking away with half the cowboy's life savings in his grimy fist.

The lanky redhead leaned back against the boulder and cussed fervently as he stared at his remaining twenty-five dollars. Things had happened so fast that he couldn't quite figure it out.

He was still sitting there when the rattle of a buggy caught his attention. Looking up, he saw Herbert Hansen driving along the rocky road toward the Beaver Creek ford.

"Just met One-Eye up the road a piece," Herbert said. "Told me he'd sold you his mine." Then Herbert threw back his head and laughed fit to pop his buttons.

Knucklehead's red hair bristled. He eased himself to his feet, balled his fists and advanced, but in the nick of time, he remembered old man Bell's warning. He unrolled his fists and made himself a cigarette.

"Anybody with any sense would know there's no gold here," Herbert said after he got back his breath. "Why'd you buy it?"

Knucklehead turned and surveyed his property, and to save his life he couldn't think of a single sensible reason to offer. The cabin was ready to fall apart, Felicia looked ready to drop dead and the cracked boulder wasn't worth a dime of anybody's money. But he couldn't admit to Herbert that an old coot like One-Eye Elmer had slickered him.

"I had my reasons, all right," he muttered.

"Yeah?" Herbert said. "Name one."

Looking as pleased as a canary-eating tomcat, Herbert slapped his dappled greys into motion and drove on across the creek.

Knucklehead went back to the boulder and stood staring at the crack, which was about three feet long and a couple inches wide. Herbert's laughter still rang in his ears, and he reckoned that his own head must be as cracked as the boulder. Anybody who would pay twenty-five hard-earned dollars for—

The next thing he knew, that hidden spark of genius had burst into flame. A cracked head, a cracked boulder—what more did a man need? Nothing, the way Knucklehead had it figured.

ALONG toward noon, he rode into Dusty-Oven with the pack-mule trailing his pinto. It seemed that a number of citizens had heard how old One-Eye had put a fast one over the redhead, and they made a few uncomplimentary remarks concerning a certain cowboy's shortage of brains. But Knucklehead merely

smiled mysteriously and rode on to Skinner's General Store.

"Knucklehead," old man Skinner said first thing, "what's this I hear about you buying One-Eye's claim?"

"Knucklehead let the question ride. He shelled out his remaining twenty-five dollars and spent it for barbed wire, grub, a pound of rock salt and a few other articles.

"Why you want that wire?" Skinner asked.

"I don't aim to have nobody trespassing on my claim."

"You crazy?" Skinner snorted. "That ole claim is as no good as a boot full of holes."

"If anybody should ask you," Knucklehead said calmly, "it's worth exactly five thousand dollars to me."

Before Skinner could get back his breath, Knucklehead had loaded his mule and was on his way out of town, looking neither to the right nor the left.

Later, the citizens wandered into Skinner's store, gathered about the cracker barrel and had a good laugh over the ranny's valuation of his property.

"That Knucklehead," Skinner said, "was likely dropped on his head when he was a baby."

It was purely accidental that Slab Sholtz happened to be Knucklehead's first visitor. Slab ran out of eating tobacco and headed for Dusty-Oven to lay in a fresh supply. On the way across the creek, he was surprised to see that someone had strung a high barbed wire fence around One-Eye's old claim, using the scrub pines for posts. Curious, he rode up to the fence and peered between the wires.

What he saw, made him more curious than ever. Knucklehead Nolte sat on an old stool beside the granite boulder, staring into the crack that opened into one smooth side. On the redhead's bony face was an expression of rapture.

Slab blinked, rubbed his eyes and looked again. "Hey, what you doing?" he called.

"Looking," Knucklehead answered without taking his eyes from the crack.

"What at?"

"Nothing much." Then Knucklehead suddenly laughed as if he'd seen something very funny inside the boulder.

Slab decided to have a look for himself. He followed the fence to the gate. But the gate was fastened with a logchain and a padlock, and a sign said, *No Trespassing.*

Blinking owlishly, Slab stared through the gate at the long-legged cowboy sitting by the boulder, and observed the muzzle-loader slanted within easy reach.

"Knucklehead," he said hoarsely, "me and you is ole friends. How about letting me have a look?"

Knucklehead's answer was to reach out a bony hand and let his long fingers play along the barrel of the muzzle loader. Slab decided to go on to Dusty-Oven for his eating tobacco.

Naturally, he mentioned the fact that Knucklehead had something cornered in a crack in a boulder and was mighty fussy about letting anybody have a look at it. That afternoon, several Dusty-Oven citizens drifted out to the claim and stood just outside the barbed wire enclosure, watching Knucklehead, who sat there in the shade, looking into the crack and grinning like a kid who's found a wagonload of gumdrops.

They read the numerous no trespassing signs, eyed the muzzle-loader with misgivings and mumbled to one another in a frustrated manner. But no one took a chance on climbing over the fence.

TOWARD sundown, Herbert Hansen drove up in his slick buggy, alighted and sauntered to the gate. After watching awhile, he allowed that Knucklehead was nuttier than a walnut grove, climbed into his buggy and drove on toward the Lazy B.

That night, the Sholtz brothers rode within a quarter-mile of the fence, left their horses and stole silently through the darkness to the gate. There they lay in silence, studying the cabin and the boulder.

"Ain't no gold in that boulder," Slab said at last, "or ole One-Eye would've found it."

"Ain't nothing in it," Soup declared without conviction.

"He's likely asleep," Sugar whispered hoarsely. "Cover me, boys, while I climb over this here gate. Once we get the drop on that long-legged maverick, we'll have a look in that crack."

Slab and Soup boosted their younger brother over the gate. Sugar took two steps forward and tripped over a hidden wire. There followed a great clamor that sounded like a bucket of rocks falling on a tin roof, and Knucklehead came to the door of the cabin, wide awake and yelling.

Sugar leaped to his feet, lunged for the gate and was halfway over when a great blast flung him the rest of the way.

"I'm shot!" he bellowed, leaped to his feet and raced after Slab and Soup, who were running like a pair of spooked antelopes.

Reaching their mounts, they took time to examine Sugar's wounds.

"Quit blubbering," Slab said. "You ain't bleeding none."

"Rock salt," Soup muttered darkly. "He had that ole gun loaded to the hilt with rock salt. We ought to go back and teach him some manners."

But they didn't go back. Unable to sit down, Sugar was forced to walk home. On the way, he swore his brothers to secrecy, but someway it got out about how Knucklehead had rigged up a burglar alarm system and was waiting hopefully for his next victim.

A week passed, and not a day went by without from one to a dozen visitors nosing around the wire fence. All the time, Knucklehead ignored them as long as they stayed their distance. When he wasn't eating or sleeping, he sat on the old stool and stared into the crack in the boulder. It beat anything anybody had ever heard tell of.

The news of this strange phenomenon spread far and wide, and people came for miles to look between the wires of Knucklehead's barricade. Some of them even brought along spyglasses, climbed to the tops of trees and tried to see into the crack. But the angle was wrong, or the light was bad, and nobody could see worth shucks.

Herbert stopped almost every time he went by on his way to the Lazy B. He had an uneasy feeling that he might be missing out on something by not looking into that crack, yet he couldn't help thinking that Knucklehead was a mite crazy. Finally he decided to bring Cathy and old man Bell to the claim and let them see how crazy the redhead had become. He reckoned that old man Bell would be glad he'd gotten rid of Knucklehead and that Cathy would feel lucky she hadn't married him.

WHEN THE three arrived at the claim, it seemed that Knucklehead had just seen something mighty funny going on in that crack, for he slapped his knees and haw-hawed loud enough to be heard a mile away.

"Hello, William," Cathy called.

"Hi," he said without taking his eyes off the crack.

"What're you doing, William?"

"Looking."

"What do you see?"

"Nothing much. Haw-haw! Wow!"

"You do too see something!"

Knucklehead was too busy looking to reply.

"Please, William," Cathy said sweetly, "tell me what you see that's so wonderful."

Knucklehead didn't seem to hear her.

"Herbert," she said, "climb over that fence, look into the crack and tell me what you see."

Herbert made no move to obey.

"Herbert," she said coldly, "you heard me!"

Face somewhat pale, Herbert glanced at old man Bell. The oldster looked slightly unfriendly. Herbert turned his gaze on the muzzle-loader slanted against the boulder and thought what a fool he had been to bring Cathy and her pa here.

"You're not afraid, are you, Herbert?" Cathy asked scornfully.

"Of course not," he said, holding his voice steady with an effort. "It's just that —well, he's crazy, and you never know what a crazy man will do."

Cathy didn't seem to buy that. "Herbert," she said in a voice filled with ice, "either go see what's in that crack, or take me home."

On the way to the Lazy B, Herbert found himself in the doghouse, and it didn't take him long to learn that he would stay there as far as Cathy was concerned until he solved the mystery of the crack in the boulder.

So the next morning, he dropped in to see Sheriff Ringstead and casually mentioned the coming election and that maybe the sheriff ought to ride out and take a peek into that boulder. Now Ringstead didn't have any particular fondness for Herbert or Herbert's Pa, but he did have considerable respect for the influence they exerted through the Dusty-Oven bank. That same morning, he saddled his cayuse and rode out to the claim.

A HALF-DOZEN gents were there ahead of him, staring through the fence at Knucklehead, who in turn was staring into the crack. Ringstead had been sheriff of Wide-Loop County for twenty years and didn't take no nonsense from nobody. He took hold of the gate and gave it a violent shake.

"Open up in the name of the law," he ordered.

Knucklehead didn't even bother to look away from the crack.

"You heard me," Ringstead said. "Open up, or—"

"This is private property," Knucklehead said calmly. "Reckon you ain't got no more right than anybody to trespass." His long fingers touched the barrel of the muzzle-loader.

Ringstead's face turned from pink to purple. He shook the gate and kicked it once for good measure. "You're under arrest!" he bellowed.

"What's the charge?" Knucklehead inquired mildly.

"For disturbing the peace and being a public nuisance."

"Here? Five miles from the nearest house?"

Ringstead glanced uneasily about. He kind of wished he'd gone about this business in a more friendly way. But now it was too late for diplomacy.

"I'm a-coming in!" he blustered.

Knucklehead didn't bother to look up, but he let his bony hand slide along the gun barrel toward the trigger guard.

"Got a warrant?" he asked softly.

"Don't need no warrant."

Knucklehead said nothing. He merely laid the gun across his knees and stared into the crack.

Ringstead hesitated and was lost. "I'll be back," he yelled. "And when I come, I'll have a warrant!"

"Sheriff," Knucklehead said, "I'm positive I ain't broke any laws. I paid cash for this property. If a man wants to fence in his property and keep out snoopers, the law's on his side. And if anybody is disturbing the peace or being a nuisance, it's people like you who come here and pester me in my own home."

"You'll see!" Ringstead bellowed. "You just wait!"

"I'll wait, all right," Knucklehead said, staring into the crack and smiling pleasantly. "But if you fix out a warrant for me and can't make it stick, I'll hire a smart lawyer and make it so hot for you, you won't know beans from buckshot!"

Ringstead decided on diplomacy, after all. "I'll make a deal with you," he said. "You tell me what you see in that crack, and I'll forget this warrant business."

"It's a deal, Sheriff," Knucklehead said. "I don't see anything."

"Now, looky," Ringstead sputtered. "Don't lie to me."

"It's the truth, Sheriff," Knucklehead said, gazing into the crack and smiling happily. "Now that I've told you, why don't you stick to your bargain and go back to town."

Ringstead fumed and cussed. But when he realized that he was putting on quite a show for the spectators, he climbed aboard his cayuse and rode away. He reckoned, election or no election, if Herbert wanted to know what was in that crack, he'd have to do his own looking.

THERE was quite a crowd hanging around the barbed wire fence the day Herbert decided to take the bull by the horns and look into that crack. Two things

urged him on—Cathy's scornful coldness and his own curiosity.

Arriving at the creek, he tied his dapple-greys to a pine and strode to the gate, a determined look on his handsome face. As usual Knucklehead sat looking into the shoulder.

Herbert lit a cigar carefully and cleared his throat in an impressive manner.

"Mr. Nolte," he said formally, "I've come to talk business."

"Go away," Knucklehead said.

Unperturbed, Herbert took a large, thick envelope from his coat pocket and flung it over the gate toward Knucklehead. It fell close to the boulder.

"You'll find something in there that'll interest you," Herbert said, and sat down to wait.

Nearly an hour later, Knucklehead took time out from his crack-gazing to examine the envelope. He seemed greatly surprised at what he found in it and turned to stare at Herbert who still sat by the gate, smoking his fifth cigar.

Slowly Knucklehead shook his head. "I can't do it," he said mournfully.

Herbert paled slightly. "You mean you won't—"

"I'm an honest man, Herbert. There ain't nothing to see."

"Look here, Nolte," Herbert said firmly. "I know what I want and exactly how bad I want it. Take it or leave it."

Knucklehead sighed deeply. "Guess there's nothing for me to do but take it. But I feel kind of low-down mean about the whole business."

Looking like somebody who had lost all his relatives, he put the envelope into a pocket.

Then he saddled his pinto, went to the gate, unlocked it and handed over the key to Herbert.

"It's all yours—lock, stock and barrel," he said.

Whistling something that sounded faintly like a funeral dirge, he mounted his twenty-dollar pony and slowly rode away from the claim.

"Why," he told old man Bell and Cathy that evening as they sat on the front porch of the Lazy B ranch house, "you could of knocked me down with a breath of fresh air when I found all that money in that envelope. Can't get over it, Herbert's paying me five thousand cash for that no-good claim."

GRINNING, old man Bell shoved to his feet. He reckoned three was a crowd. Anyway, Cathy had been trying to get rid of him for the past hour.

"You say Herbert like to hollered his head off when he found there was nothing in that crack to see?"

"Why, yes," Knucklehead said, looking very deeply grieved. "Can't understand it. Told him all the time that he wouldn't see a thing."

The oldster chuckled. "Wanted his money back?"

"Yep. But like everybody in Dusty-Oven said after they got over laughing about it, a deal's a deal, and—"

"Good night, son."

"Good night, Mr. Bell."

Then Knucklehead gazed dreamily at Cathy, who sat in a strip of moonlight. He wondered just how so much prettiness and charm could ever be rolled up in one small package.

"William," she asked softly, "could I see the money?"

"Why, no." He was a little surprised to discover that her head was resting on his shoulder and that her honey-gold hair was tickling his chin. "You see, I deposited it in Herbert's bank. Figured maybe I'd buy a little ranch and—"

But not even a man with enough sparks of genius to light up a Christmas tree could keep his mind on what he was saying at a moment like this.

# REDWOOD COUNTRY

## By L. P. HOLMES

### PART ONE

IT WAS an eerie, almost frightening thing to watch the great redwood tree die. This, thought Wade Stagmire, was truly a giant in a land of giants. It stood well along toward the far end of this ragged slash area which spread its ugly scar across the northern flank of the ridge. Many other trees had already been logged from this slash. Their stumps stood everywhere. Now the big fellow of the grove was being prepared for death.

The comparative open of the slash had burst abruptly upon Wade. For the better part of two days he'd been riding through the dim and spectral aisles of a brooding forest that had seemed endless.

He had searched for definite trails where there had been none. He had climbed ridges and crossed them, and dropped down into canyons on the far side. He had followed winding, narrow flats along the banks of cold, hurrying streams, and pushed through patches of giant ferns growing head high to a tall man. Always he had tried to work west, steadily west.

Last night, supperless, he had slept at the base of what he thought must surely be the biggest tree in the world, and then, in the chill, filtering dawn of this day, he had climbed still another ridge, to follow along it until suddenly the interminable forest gave way before him and he was in this

*THE NET WAS TIGHTENING. SOON the once peaceful rangeland would be turned into a bloody battleground, and Wade Stagmire would be in the thick of it, risking his life for a man who trusted him*

slash where morning's sunlight lay clear and golden and where lifted the sounds of men at work.

From the vantage point of his saddle, Wade, a tall man in his own right, could look clearly across the litter of the slash to the base of the towering redwood tree. By comparison, the little group of loggers working about the base of the tree were Lilliputian figures, mere human insects, intent upon this giant's destruction. The measured whine of the falling saw seemed to hold a hungry snarl.

The fall, Wade saw, would be up-slope, for he could mark the rough bed that had been prepared to receive the tree. Now, though plain animal hunger was a gnawing ache within him, Wade was prepared to watch the finish of this thing.

He thumbed a limp tobacco sack from the pocket of his faded, ragged shirt, sifted a last pinch of crumbling grains from it into a brown paper, tossed the sack away and thought cynically that when a man was down to his last cigarette, a thin one at that, then indeed the condition of his affairs was really desperate.

He scratched a match, held it briefly to the tip of the cigarette and drew the tangy smoke deep into his lungs. It brought some comfort, but was no substitute for the food he craved.

A few yards ahead of Wade stood a piled tangle of brush and limbs, the trimmings from another tree that had been felled at some past time. Now, from just beyond the tangle, a man's voice lifted in a shout.

"How much longer, Farwell?"

One of the group at the base of the redwood tree turned and gave deep voiced answer. "Any time now, Mr. Tedrow! It's beginning to talk."

Wade Stagmire stirred his ribby roan mount to movement and rode around the end of the pile of trimmings. He reined up with a small start of surprise, touching the brim of his battered old Stetson.

Here were two people, and one of them was a girl.

"Sorry," said Wade. "Didn't mean to bother. But I'm a stranger in a strange land and could use a few directions."

THEY LOOKED him over for a moment in silence, seeing a long-limbed man in worn, ragged clothes, a man leaned to gauntness from far travel and too many missed meals. His jaw was sharp angled and solid, smudged now with a bristle of whiskers, and his eyes were deep set beneath slightly frowning brows. Cool blue the eyes were, and direct as he spoke.

The man said, "Directions to where?"

Wade shrugged. "Anywhere there is food. A cattle ranch would suit best, if there is such in this country."

"Grub-liner, eh?" said the man.

A glint showed briefly in Wade's eyes and a faint flush touched his face. "Could be. But not from choice."

There had been a sting, a thread of contempt in the way the man on the stump had spoken. He was a big man, and under the red-and-black checked mackinaw he wore, his shoulders bulked heavy. His face was clean shaven, florid, his eyes on the pale side. He was bare headed, with a big shock of tawny hair. A handsome man, in a virile, physical sort of way, but his lips held the faint curl of arrogance which absolute authority gave to some men.

The girl stirred, threw a glance that held some censure at the man beside her, then looked at Stagmire. "There's the beginning of a little valley down there to the north," she said. "Follow it and you'll come to old Gib Dawson's Anchor ranch."

Her voice was low and cool and clear and fitted her perfectly, Wade thought. He thought also that here was as pretty a girl as he had ever seen. Her hair was raven black, her brows the same. But her eyes were grey, a warm shining grey. And natural color bloomed in her cheeks. Her mouth was generous, sweetly curved and softly red. She had on a plaid wool skirt, trim laced boots and a scarlet mackinaw, the upturned collar of which framed the tapered perfection of her face.

Wade couldn't keep his admiration from his eyes and the girl, seeing it, showed deepening color. He touched his hat again.

"Ma'am, I'm obliged."

The tawny-haired man had not missed that appreciation of the girl's beauty in

Wade's glance, and when he spoke his voice was rough. "Now you got the directions you wanted, there's notihng to keep you here. You're on privately owned property, anyhow."

Wade looked the fellow up and down, sharp anger working in him. But before he could speak, a shouted word echoed across the slash, stirring in its implication.

"Timber-r-r!"

The girl stood staring wide eyed at the towering redwood tree. "It's going, Ruel!" she cried. "It's going! And I feel that this is a wicked thing—"

Stagmire's glance followed that of the girl's. The great tree still stood as it had for tens of centuries, arrow straight, its lofty tip far up in the clean reaches of the sky. But it seemed to Wade as if the giant was shuddering in the throes of mortal agony. Ripping, cracking sounds, hard as rifle shots, whipped across the slash. The tree was talking all right, crying farewell to the ages of life it had known.

No longer was it so proudly straight. That distant tip was moving, swaying into the beginnings of a great arc. Slowly it moved at first, then with gathering speed. Faster—faster! A wild rushing filled the world, as though a tumultuous wind had suddenly begun to blow. It was a rushing that became a roar and the roar peaked up to a thunderous, sodden crash.

The dust of earth and of bark crushed to powder, spouted up in a cloud, and fragments of splintered branches hurtled out of that pit of chaos along the ridge slope. Then the dust drifted and thinned and settled, a shaken earth steadied, and an awed silence held. The giant was dead, and the skyline lonely with emptiness.

Gaunt and weary as it was, Wade's roan horse whirled and fought the reins, snorting at some elemental terror it did not understand. Wade, queerly shaken himself, calmed the animal and looked again at the girl.

She stood slender and arrow straight, staring at the emptiness of sky which the tree had filled just a few moments before. Her lovely eyes were frankly wet and her soft lips trembling.

The tawny-haired man took her by the arm. "Well, Stewart, now you've seen the boys fell a really big one. Quite a thrill, eh?"

She pulled away from him, brushing a hand across her eyes, steadying herself. Then she spoke huskily. "No, Ruel, not a thrill. A tragedy. I wish I hadn't seen it. It had lived too long to die—that way."

The man laughed. "Nonsense! There's enough lumber in that fellow to build a small community of houses. And that's what our business is, isn't it—lumbering?"

The girl did not answer him. Instead, seeming to feel Wade's glance, she turned and met it.

"Ma'am," said Wade quietly, "I know exactly what you mean."

Once more he touched his hat, then swung the roan away and rode off down through the slash.

HEADQUARTERS of the Anchor ranch was log built and stood on a low bench to the north of the small river which cut down the center of this long running, timber-rimmed valley. Wade Stagmire, following along the south bank of the river, struck a trail which forded the river at a swift running shallows, crossed over and came up to the headquarters past a generous spread of corrals.

A sweating, recently run saddle bronc stood ground reined at a corral gate. Over on the low porch of the ranch house, two men stood talking.

One of these was a man well past middle age. He was gaunt and grizzled, with fierce, angry eyes. His right leg was withered and twisted and he supported himself on that side with a crutch. The other man was an Indian, stocky, broad, expressionless of face. Both watched Wade with an intentness that was wary and suspicious as he rode up and pulled the roan to a tired halt.

The voice of the man with the crutch struck out with a harsh rumble. "Who in hell are you, and what do you want?"

"I ate last about forty-eight hours ago," answered Wade.

"Damned grub-liner, eh?"

This made twice that the name had been thrown at Wade in the last couple of hours, and the contempt wrapped up in it stirred the anger in him. But he kept his tone even and quiet.

"Some might call it that, and be wrong. I'm flat broke, but I'm no bum. I'll work for what I eat. And I'm damned hungry."

Meeting this old fellow's fierce gaze, Wade Stagmire wondered at the strange mixture of emotions reflected in the blazing

***"Interested in a job that could leave you dead out in the timber?" the old man asked***

eyes under the jutting, frosty brows. Rage was there, a bitter, helpless rage, and something almost like despair.

"Where you from?" came the boring question.

Wade jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "East."

"How far east?"

"Quite a ways. The Sacramento Valley."

The old fellow was thinking this over, at the same time that his fierce eyes were running over Wade from head to foot as though he would take him apart, piece by piece, and see what his make-up was.

"Interested in a job, a regular job? A hell of a tough job, that could leave you dead out in the timber, or so damn beat up and broken you can't crawl?"

It was shot at him so abruptly that for a moment Wade hardly grasped the implications, and then he was still for a moment while he considered.

"It's an honest job," added the old fellow, thinking that this might be the point Wade was hesitating over.

"We'll talk about it," Wade said at last.

"Fair enough," growled the cattleman. "What's your name?"

"Stagmire—Wade Stagmire."

"I'm Gib Dawson. This is Noyo. He'll feed you. And that roan horse of yours looks like it could stand a manger full of hay and a couple of quarts of oats. You'll find both in the barn. Help yourself."

The old fellow spun expertly on his crutch and went into the ranch house.

The Indian, Noyo, unsaddled and corralled the horse by the gate, then showed Wade where to put the roan and where the oat bin was. After which the Indian went over to the cookshack.

Wade unsaddled, found an old sack and gave the roan a brisk rubdown while the animal munched hungrily at the oats.

There was a bucket of water and a tin wash basin and a considerably used towel by the door of the cookshack and Wade treated himself to a wash, then combed his thick brown hair with his fingers.

Inside the place a steak was sizzling and the aroma of it set the juices to running in his mouth and deepened the hunger brightness in his eyes. A strange, shaking weakness ran all through him. This, he thought, was what stark physical need for food could do to a man.

BESIDES the smoking steak with its oozing, savory richness, Noyo put on the cookshack table a big plate of potatoes, half a loaf of bread and most of a pot of warmed over coffee. Finally there was a big wedge of huckleberry pie. Despite his wolfish hunger, Wade forced himself to eat slowly, a fact the Indian cook noted with approval.

"You come long way," said Noyo abruptly.

"Yeah," nodded Wade warily. "A long way."

"Where you think you go?"

"Any place—no place."

"Mebbe so you stop here," said Noyo. "Mebbe so you go to work for Gib Dawson. Him old, got bum leg. Needs good man in the saddle."

These first few mouthfuls of food had begun to take hold already, and did wonders for Wade. The strange, grey weakness left him, and the inner tautness that had held him, mind and body, softened up.

"You say Gib Dawson needs a good man in the saddle, Noyo. How do you know I'm a good man?"

Noyo shrugged. "You see horse. You look at it careful. Then you know if it's a good horse or a bad horse."

"Maybe it's not as simple as that," said Wade carefully. "Human animals are harder to read than horses."

Noyo shrugged again, said nothing more.

Wade cleaned up every scrap of food in front of him and finally leaned back with a deep sigh of content, replete as he hadn't been in weeks. Automatically he reached for his smoking, then realized he had none. Seeing the move, Noyo supplied tobacco and papers. Stagmire spun a cigarette into shape, lighted up.

"You're a damn fine cook, Noyo," he observed. "And—thanks."

"No thank me," said Noyo. "Thank Gib Dawson." And then he added with a note of fierceness, "Him good man, too—plenty good!"

Mindful of Gib Dawson's offer, Wade left the cookshack and headed for the ranch house. As he went he pondered the difference a full stomach could give to a man's outlook on life. An hour before this had seemed a hostile country, cold and unfriendly. But now there seemed a new hope, as things were looking up.

Gib Dawson was plainly waiting for him, for as he came up to the ranch house porch, the old cattleman's voice reached out from the open door.

"Come on in."

It was bachelor quarters, the furnishings frugal but sufficient and of reasonable comfort. A few chairs, a cluttered table of odds and ends, an old couch along one wall. To the right of the door was a gun rack, holding a couple of Winchester rifles. From one of the pegs hung a worn gunbelt and holster, and from the holster protruded the walnut butt of a heavy Colt six-shooter.

Gib Dawson sat in an old rocker by an open window, his crutch lying on the floor beside him. His head and shoulders were half in shadow, half in the rays of sunlight glinting through the window. The effect made him look a little old, a little weary.

Now, with his deep, shadowed eyes fixed on Wade, he said, "Drag up a chair and we'll talk over that proposition of a job. I hope you're interested."

"That could depend," said Wade soberly, "on what you think of me as well as on what I think of you."

"I've done my thinking," said Dawson. Then he added dryly, "No future in grubbing that I ever heard of."

"What makes you think I could be of any use to you?" asked Wade. "You don't know a damn thing about me."

"I know this much," growled Dawson. "You're new to this country, which means that Frank Lawrey ain't been able to work on you yet and make a damn thief out of you. I'll take a chance on all the rest."

Wade spoke slowly. "You got to admit this sounds like desperation on your part."

"It is," admitted the old fellow bluntly. "Right now I'd hire anything that could wear pants and straddle a bronc, providing I felt they'd be halfway true to their hire."

"And you think I would?"

"I'm offering you a job, ain't I? Yeah, I'll take a chance."

IT WAS Wade Stagmire's turn to study this fierce old man. Things that had occurred in the not too distant past had filled Wade with a vast cynicism concerning men and their integrity. He had become wolf-wary about such things. And so his scrutiny of Gib Dawson was suddenly cold and incisive and merciless. Those deep, somewhat haggard eyes, that seamed, leathery face—how deep did the honor of this old fellow reach? How much trust could be put in him, in his sense of fairness and justice?

Gib Dawson met this sudden hard impact of Stagmire's scrutiny without the slightest suggestion of wavering. Then he spoke abruptly and with startling insight.

"Son, somebody's hurt you badly, given you a dirty deal. You needn't worry about me. Even my enemies admit I'm honest, maybe too damn honest."

Wade made his decision. He reached to his pocket and brought out a folded paper. It was of rough, cheap stock, tattered around the edges, worn and smudged from carrying. He unfolded it carefully, held it out.

"After you look this over, maybe you'll withdraw that offer of a job," he said quietly.

Gib Dawson took the paper, held it where the sun struck it, peered at it long and carefully. Then he swung his head and fixed those fierce old eyes on Wade Stagmire intently.

"Was it?" he demanded harshly.

"Was it—what?"

"Murder! That's what it says here Wade Stagmire, wanted for the murder of Dodd Evans!"

"No," said Stagmire simply, "it wasn't murder. Oh, I killed him, all right. But it wasn't murder, not unless you'd call not even an even break murder. He had two shots at me while my back was turned, two shots at me before I even knew who was shooting or why. And how he ever missed me, I'll never know. He was in the mouth of an alley I'd just walked by. But he did miss me. Maybe because it was evening—dusk. Maybe because the damned rat didn't even have nerve enough to do a good job of shooting a man in the back.

"But he tried, twice. I caught the flash of his gun on his second shot, and that's what I cut loose at. I had a hunch, but I wasn't even rightly certain who he was until I walked over to him. So that's what happened, and that's the truth."

"But the people in those parts—where it happened—wouldn't believe you?" said Gib Dawson.

Wade shrugged, bitterness pulling his face bleak. "Truth or belief wasn't good enough on a range where the Evans family is all powerful. At that I might have been able to make a legitimate self-defense plea stand up if the man I worked for and thought was my friend had stood behind me. But he seemed to think that a mere cowpuncher's neck wasn't worth risking the power and enmity of the Evans family. So there wasn't anything for me to do but hide out and then skip the country. I collected that dodger off a crossroads sign post."

"What set this Dodd Evans after your scalp, son?" asked Dawson.

"It started at a dance. There was a waitress, a biscuit shooter from a res-

taurant in town that Dodd Evans was after. Far as I know, she was a real nice girl, and she had no use for Evans at all. Anyhow, this night I was dancing with her and Dodd Evans came bulling on to the floor and wanted to cut in, which would have been all right if he'd been a regular sort of a guy. But I knew the girl didn't want to dance with him, wanted no part of him, so I told him to go mind his business. Right away he began getting rough—he fancied himself that way."

Wade shrugged again and went on. "One thing led to another and pretty soon me and Evans were out in the street, swapping punches. I gave him a real going over, I guess, and he wasn't man enough to take his licking and like it. It was a couple of weeks later that he laid for me in the alley. That's the story."

WITH MEASURED even movements, Gib Dawson tore the dodger to shreds, let the pieces fritter through his fingers. "Son," he said quietly, "you sling your saddle on the Anchor corral. We understand each other."

The old fellow pushed himself erect, stood balanced on his sound leg and put out a gnarled hand. "We'll shake on it. I think that today brought me the kind of man I been looking for for a long, long time. Yeah, shake!"

Their hands met and now the conviction swept over Wade Stagmire that here was a man he could believe in and trust to the ends of the earth.

"I'll earn my hire, Mr. Dawson, and be true to it," he said.

"I know you will, son," was the gruff reply. "And make it plain Gib."

The Indian, Noyo, put his head in the door. "They come now," he said.

"Hah! It was at once an exclamation and a savage growl that broke from Gib Dawson's lips. "Three coyotes! Three slimy, crooked, double-crossing thieves! I'd like to hang them. But all I can do is tell them off and fire them."

He stooped, caught up his crutch and stumped out onto the porch. Noyo slipped inside, lifted down one of the Winchester rifles and moved to a window. Wade, wondering, stepped to the door and looked out.

Three riders were just pulling in at the corrals. Gib Dawson's voice whipped harshly across at them. "You—Trautwine, Krug, Gentry—come over here!"

The three riders stepped from their saddles, stared across at the old cattleman. For a moment they hesitated, some murmured words passing between them.

Virg Trautwine was long and lanky with a hatchet face and a loose mouth. Burt Krug was shorter, thicker through the body, with black, tightly curled hair that clung close to his skull. His face was round, bland and expressionless. His eyes were small and beady. Rocky Gentry was of medium size, soft stepping, a dissipated hardness in his face and eyes. Trautwine seemed to be the spokesman for the three.

"What's on your mind, boss?" he asked. "Me and Burt and Rocky been—"

"Never mind the 'boss' stuff," cut in Gib Dawson savagely. "And I know where you been. You've been turning over another jag of Anchor cattle to Price Mabry and some other riders of Frank Lawrey's. How much did Mabry pay you for them, you dirty, damn, crooked whelps?"

Gib Dawson's harsh fury deepened and swelled. "I've seen some low-down specimens in my time, but the lowest of them were upstanding men in comparison to you three. By rights I should boot you off this ranch without a cent of pay. But I never in all my life held out a cent on any man who ever rode for me, so I'm not starting now. Go get your gear. You're through—fired! Come by here when you leave. I'll have your time made out. Hurry up—move! You pollute the air!"

Watching, Wade Stagmire saw several expressions pass across the faces of the three. Virg Trautwine began to bluster.

"Dawson, you can't talk to us that way. Why, we don't even know what you're driving at. All this talk about cattle and Price Mabry. We—"

Gib Dawson waved a weary arm. "Take your damn lies away with you. Noyo saw what you did. He watched the whole deal. And Noyo don't lie."

Rocky Gentry spat a thin curse. "That damned Indian!" He swung his narrow head, as though looking for Noyo. "Next time I bump into him, I wear out a quirt on him. Come on, Virg—Burt! No use trying to argue out of it."

Gentry turned and headed for the bunkhouse and the others followed.

GIB DAWSON came back in, his crutch thumping. He sat down at the table and got busy with time and checkbooks. Wade stood in a corner of the room, watching and thinking. A thread of anger had begun to burn in him, deepening all the time. What he had just heard set this stir to working.

"They ready," said Noyo presently from his window.

Dawson bunched three checks in his hand, went out on the porch again. Burt Krug and Rocky Gentry were in their saddles, while Virg Trautwine came over on foot, leading his horse. There was a sullen look to him now. He dropped the reins of his horse and scuffed his spurs truculently as he stepped on to the porch.

"I don't take kindly to the names you been calling, Dawson. Watch your tongue!"

The old cattleman held out the three checks, looked at Trautwine with searing contempt. "You damned dirty thieving whelps!" he said deliberately.

Virg Trautwine took the checks with his left hand, and then, with a roll of his shoulder, threw his right fist into Gib Dawson's face, snarling thinly, "I warned you, Dawson!"

With only the crutch and one sound leg to hold him up, Gib Dawson was in no condition to take that sudden, cowardly blow. It knocked the old fellow flat, brought the bright crimson of blood to his face.

Wade, watching from just inside the door, could hardly believe his eyes. That any man would be low enough to hit another twice his age, a crippled old fellow with a crutch! A burst of black, savage fury surged through him, and his voice rang harshly, "Watch those other two, Noyo!"

Then he went out of the door in a long, low lunge that carried him right up to the startled Trautwine. The gangling rider tried to whirl, clawing for his gun. Before he could get it, Wade hit him. It was a reaching blow that had all the power of Wade's lunge behind it. It made a gory wreck of Trautwine's mouth.

The man went reeling, trying desperately to hold his footing. The drop-off of the low porch was only a scant foot, but when Trautwine's clattering boots struck this emptiness, he went down in a long, tangled sprawl.

Wade went right after him, kicking the half-drawn gun from Trautwine's hand. Wade swung his boot toe again, none too gently.

"Get up!" he gritted. "Get up and take it or I'll kick you all the way to the corrals, the same as I would any other mangy, cowardly dog. Get up!"

Trautwine managed it, scrambling and floundering. And then Wade went to work on him, bleak and mercilessly. He belted Trautwine back and forth, cutting him up, punishing him wickedly, hitting hard enough to keep Trautwine off-balance and not hard enough to knock him down.

Trautwine swung a few wild, aimless blows that did him no good, for he was still numbed from that first crushing wallop that Stagmire had thrown. Wade kept after him, showing him no mercy and feeling none, seeing only Trautwine's battered face through a red mist, and hitting it, hitting it.

Then, from what seemed a far distance, Wade heard Gib Dawson's words. "That's enough, son. Finish it!"

STAGMIRE set himself, straightened Trautwine with a stabbing left and then uncoiled all the way from his heels behind a final blasting right. The blow spun Trautwine completely around and dropped him in a quivering heap.

Wade backed up a couple of steps, felt his boot heel hit a hard object. It was Trautwine's gun. Wade caught it up and in a slightly crouched prowl, headed for Burt Krug and Rocky Gentry who still sat their saddles, staring.

*A glint of anger showed in Hubbard's eyes. "I resent your words and I resent your presence. You will kindly leave!"*

"Now then," he said hoarsely, "maybe you two rats would like to make a real fight of this? Go ahead, if you feel that way!"

Krug and Gentry made no move. For several reasons. One of these was that the stocky figure of Noyo stood in the ranch house door, a rifle at his shoulder. The other was that they'd just seen Virg Trautwine, supposedly a pretty fair man with his fists, whipped to a bleeding rag in brief seconds by this ragged, cold-jawed stranger now challenging them. They wanted no part of anything, just now.

Gib Dawson's grim voice rang out again. "Tell 'em to get Trautwine across his saddle and get him out of here, son."

Wade gave the gun he held a little wave. "You heard. Get about it!"

Krug and Gentry dismounted, went over to Trautwine. They propped him up, got him to his feet and half carried him to his horse. Trautwine's head was sagging and he was only barely conscious. Grunting and cursing they boosted him into his saddle. The checks Trautwine had held were scattered on the earth. Wade picked them up, handed them to Krug.

"That'll be all!"

The three of them rode away, down slope toward the river. Gentry and Krug rode on either side of Trautwine, supporting him in his saddle. When the tangle of alders along the stream hid them, Wade Stagmire turned and went slowly back to the ranch house porch.

Gib Dawson was on his feet again, his crutch under his arm. With his shirt sleeve he'd wiped the blood from his mouth. Now he was staring bleakly across the sunlit little valley, and the look on his face made Wade wince. For he knew what Gib Dawson was thinking.

The grizzled cattleman was looking back to the years when he'd been a whole man and a younger one, back to days when no surly cowhand would have dared lift a hand against him—back to days when he'd been able to fight his own battles and hold his own against any man. But now—

There was a singularly deep and hurting tragedy in this moment, and Wade respected it by keeping complete silence. And his own thoughts went back to an earlier time in this day, when he'd seen the great redwood tree fall. Somehow there was a similarity. That great tree, this grizzled old-timer, Gib Dawson—

Gib Dawson shook himself, turned toward the ranch house door. "Thanks, son," he said gruffly. "Now come on in here. We got things to talk about."

Noyo had put the rifle back on the rack. He stood at the side of the door when Wade entered. He dropped a hand on Wade's arm with a quick, firm pressure and in the Indian's black eyes there was a deep and shining light.

"I said it," murmured Noyo. "Good man!"

DAWSON sat in the old rocker by the window, packing a stubby pipe of tobacco. He lit up, lipping the pipe stem gingerly because of his cut mouth. Presently he said, "You just saw a small part, a very small part of the situation, son. Still interested in that job?"

"We settled that a little while ago," Wade answered quietly. "I'm with you as long as you want me."

The old rocker creaked gently and smoke wreathed Gib Dawson's grim face. "That river down yonder, it's the Sotoyome, flows into the Pacific Ocean about ten miles from here. On a headland above the mouth of the Sotoyome River is Castle City. Mainly, it's a lumbering town. You might say that Jared Hubbard owns that town, same as he owns the big sawmill there. Besides that he's got a bunch of logging camps back in the redwoods. He's got plenty of loggers and mill hands to feed, so he uses a lot of beef."

He puffed thoughtfully, then continued, "Frank Lawrey's got a contract with Hubbard to furnish that beef. Some of it he raises on his Wagon Wheel ranch about twenty miles down coast. Some of it he brings down from Eureka or up from San Francisco by boat. And some of it he rustles from me. It's that last angle we're interested in. I ain't the only one Lawrey's had his gang of tough riders work on. I

could name you three or four other outfits that used to run cattle on the little inland valley ranges who went busted because Lawrey stole all their profits away. He'll have me in the same spot in another six months unless I can put a crimp in him some way."

"This fellow Hubbard," said Stagmire, "doesn't he know he's buying rustled beef? Have you ever tried appealing to him?"

A grim and mirthless smile touched Gib Dawson's face. "You'd have to meet Jared Hubbard and get to know him a little, son, to get a better answer to that than I can give you. In his own opinion, Jared Hubbard is a big man, a very big man. Almost as big as God Almighty. He's rotten rich and getting richer by the minute. He owns an empire and he's the emperor." Dawson's smile faded as he went on, "He sits in his office and listens to the saws in the mill whining out more dollars for him at every pass. Oh, I guess in his way the man is honest enough, but he's just blinded by his own importance and can't be bothered by the affairs of a little guy like me. Just so long as his empire keeps running smooth, that's enough for Jared Hubbard."

The old cattleman paused to freshen his pipe with another match. "The fellow who knows all about how Frank Lawrey gets a lot of his beef is Ruel Tedrow, Hubbard's general superintendent. Tedrow is Hubbard's right hand man and Hubbard leaves all the details of supplying the cookhouses and boardinghouses for the logging camps and the mill strictly up to Tedrow. And the cheaper Tedrow can run those places while still keeping the loggers and mill hands happy, the better the books look to Jared Hubbard.

"So, when Tedrow can buy cheap beef, he buys it, and to hell with where it came from. Naturally, Frank Lawrey can sell rustled beef plenty cheap and still make a profit. Now you have the general picture, son, and I agree with you that it ain't a pretty one from where we stand."

Wade paced up and down the room. There was, he thought grimly, no question about his needing a job and needing it badly. He didn't have a dime in his jeans, not even smoking money. His gun, well, he'd had to sell that to eat, along his getaway trail. And to get the last meal he'd just eaten, he'd had to grub-line, a practice which could never set well with a man of pride. And Wade Stagmire had his share of that.

But this job he was taking on now with Gib Dawson was little short of fantastic. He, a stranger in a strange land, trying to take hold and get results against such a setup as Gib Dawson had just outlined!

HE STOPPED beside Gib Dawson's chair, looked down at the old fellow. "I'm taking the job, of course, but what good I can do you, if any, I'm no ways sure. I'm afraid you see me as a damn sight bigger man than I see myself, Gib."

The cattleman grunted. "You've growed a heap since I first set eyes on you, son."

"This fellow Tedrow," said Wade thoughtfully. "A big man, heavy shouldered, florid faced and with a shock of yellow hair?"

Gib Dawson swung his head in some surprise. "That's him. You've met him?"

Wade nodded, and told of the meeting up in the slash where the big redwood had been felled. "Lot of arrogance in that fellow," he ended.

"Arrogant and crooked," snorted Gib Dawson. "Jest as crooked as Frank Lawrey. And cruel. Another man's neck don't mean a damn thing to Ruel Tedrow. He's walked over the bodies of plenty of men, getting up to where he is. But Jared Hubbard swears by him. I've even heard it said that Hubbard has Tedrow picked for the husband of his niece, once she gets back from the East where's she's been getting a heap of schooling. And that would be pure hell for that girl. No sweeter, finer girl ever lived than Stewart Hubbard. I knew her well."

He smiled to himself, then added, "Before Hubbard sent her East to school, she used to ride out here to visit with me, regular. Had a little paint Indian pony and I tell you it was mighty fine to see her come riding up from the river, pretty as a spring morning, coming to spend the day

with old Gib Dawson. Me, I'm hoping Stewart meets some fine young feller in the East and marries him and to hell with what Jared Hubbard thinks."

"There was a girl with Ruel Tedrow this morning," said Wade. "Pretty—as you say. Prettiest girl I ever saw. Black hair, big grey eyes—."

"Lord A'mighty!" burst out Dawson, rearing forward in his chair. "That's Stewart!"

"I heard Tedrow call her by that name," Wade said. "She was the one who gave me directions to this ranch."

"That's Stewart," said Dawson again. "So she's back. Wonder if she's forgot me? I sure would like to see that girl again." The old fellow lay back in his chair, his fierce eyes softening over past memories.

Wade said, "Those three you fired today—they were all the crew you had, Gib?"

"They were all." The cattleman cleared his throat harshly. "Once there were three others. I let them go, damn fool that I was. I believed lies about 'em that Virg Trautwine told me. But now I know they were good men, while it was Trautwine and Gentry and Krug who were crooked. Yeah, Bill Vessels and Buck Hare and Harley Jacks were damn good men. I was too cussed blind to see it. I sure wish I had 'em back with me."

"Where are they now?"

"Ain't rightly sure. I did hear that Bill Vessels an' Buck Hare were talking of starting up a little spread in Wind Pike Valley. That's north of here. Mebbe Harley Jacks went in with 'em. Or mebbe they never did get an outfit going. With this leg I don't get around much any more. All I know I got to depend on others to tell me, and most of the time it's jest talk and nothing else."

"Well," said Wade, "one thing is dead certain. We got to scare up some riders somewhere. Noyo and me can't handle it all. Think I'd have any chance of picking up a couple more men in this Castle City?"

"You might, son," nodded Dawson. "Like I said, mostly it's a lumbering town. But some stray riders drift in and out from time to time. Between here and Eureka there's quite a few cattle layouts, back in the inland valleys. Cowhands come and go, drift around a lot. Yeah, you might pick up some hands in Castle City."

"I'll give it a try," decided Wade. "If we can't find any there, then I'll spend a week north and inland and see what I can do."

Gib Dawson got up, went over to the table and reached for his checkbook. He scribbled for a moment, then tore out a check and handed it to Wade.

"You got to have some money in your jeans, son. Call this an advance on your first month's wages. And you could use some new jeans and a new shirt, if you don't mind my saying so. You can cash this at Sam Alexander's store in Castle City."

The check was for fifty dollars. Wade folded it carefully, stowed it away. "You sure are showing a lot of trust in a man wanted for murder, Gib," he said, a little huskily.

"Murder be damned!" growled Gib Dawson. "That word never did fit you and never will." The old cattleman stumped over to the gun rack, lifted down the belt and holstered Colt that hung there.

"Mine," Dawson said. "And an honest outfit. Yours, now. Strap it on, son. After what you did to Virg Trautwine, the word will spread. Then there's Krug and Gentry. They might get ideas. If they do, pin their ears back. And I'll stand with you through hell fire. That's a promise!"

Wade strapped on the gun. Gib followed him to the door. "You'll hit the town trail along the north bank of the river, just below the ford. Catch yourself up a fresh bronc. That roan of yours has earned a rest. And, son though it shapes up as a tough fight ahead, I got a feeling about it. I think my luck's changed. And yours."

DRESSED in new, clean clothes from the skin out, shaven and shorn, Wade Stagmire stepped from the door of a barber shop into the main street of Castle City. He had cashed the check Gib Dawson had given him at Sam Alex-

ander's big general store, made his clothes purchases along with several other items, then sought out this barber shop and in addition to a shave and a haircut, had bought a steaming, luxurious bath.

The all over change gave Wade the feeling of being practically newborn. Now he was ready to start earning some part of that fifty dollars.

The main street of Castle City ran north and south, with several lesser streets cutting across it at right angles. The buildings were virtually all of redwood lumber, solidly built, with board sidewalks scarred and splintered from the calked boots of loggers. There were a number of the logger in evidence, burly fellows for the most part, in mackinaws and cruiser shirts and stagged trousers, their calked boots crunching as they swaggered along.

Jared Hubbard's sawmill lay southwest of town, along the curve of the headland, where the long, lower lagoon of the Sotoyome River flowed into a sizable cove which was rimmed with low cliffs and studded with black, dripping rocks, around and over which the surf boiled and creamed endlessly.

Beyond the cove was the ocean itself, grey-green, surging, never still, and vast as the world. The breath of it was gusty and full of salty vigor, and its voice was solid and constant and elemental as the great combers swelled and rolled and crashed their might against the outer headland.

Mighty as the ocean's roar was, it could not smother the song of the saws in Jared Hubbard's mill, hungry saws, droning sleepily one moment, but in the next setting up a high, penetrating, savage whine as they bit into another log. There were a hundred lesser noises, but these were the two that dominated all else, the ocean's rumble and the metallic scream of the saws.

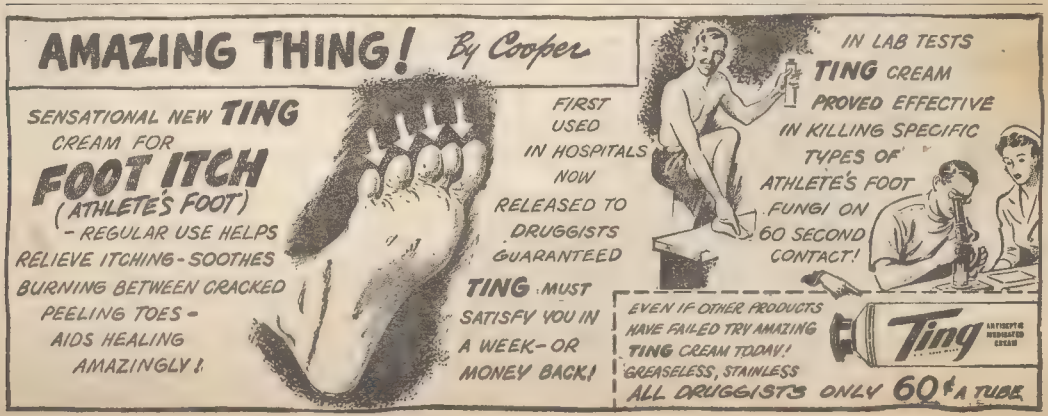
Wade had never seen the ocean before, so his first move on reaching Castle City had been to ride around the northern end of town, out to a point of the headland and have his good look at the sweep and might of the sea, and savor its penetrating, vigorous breath.

This was a thing he had promised himself when he made his getaway from the Sacramento Valley. With luck he would ride west until he met the ocean's shore. Which was just about as far as a man in the saddle could flee an unjust charge and the hateful might of the vengeful Evans clan. Here, in this new and comparatively isolated country a man might lose himself and gain a new start in life.

The barbering, the bath, the lift of respect which new clothes gave, brought out Wade's comparative youth, accented the tough leanness in him, deepened the cool gleam in his eye, put a new and confident spring in his stride. At this moment he carried his twenty-eight years lightly and confidently.

The town was built by lumber and because of lumber, but Stagmire found that his dress of a saddle man and the gun at his hip occasioned no undue interest on the part of other men as he passed along the

[*Turn page*]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street. This redwood coast was wild country and men of all sorts and callings moved along its trails and through its towns, and their business was accepted as their own.

Wade, in search of others of his calling, had no idea where such could be found and for a time was at a loss. Finally, on a side street, he saw several saddle mounts scattered along a hitch rail in front of a saloon, with a weathered sign which read simply, *The Cattleman.*

He pushed open the swing door, stepped into the comparative gloom of the place and was instantly struck and alerted by the impact of a harsh and reckless voice delineating the doubtful antecedents and ancestors of someone in no uncertain terms. He paused and listened, while blinking his eyes to adjust them to the change of light.

A BIG, RAWBONED man with craggy features and a bristly ruff of iron grey hair showing beneath his pushed back Stetson was having his say. He had his back to the bar, his elbows resting on the top of it, and a bootheel hooked over the brass foot rail. He looked completely relaxed, but the cold shine in his frosty eyes showed that he was alert for anything. His voice had a ring to it.

"I say again that you two, along with Virg Trautwine, make up three of the most unlovely lice I ever met up with. You're all crooked as drunken snakes and there's not a smidgin of truth in the whole passel of you. Now you know, and if you don't like it, what are you going to do about it?"

This was fighting talk in any man's language, thrown deliberately and contemptuously.

The two riders facing the speaker were drawn a little apart, in effect, cornering this bold speaker against the bar. Other men, with one exception, had drawn away from the bar, pushing well back to the far corners of the room, giving the central three plenty of leeway. The atmosphere of the place was taut and explosive.

The lone other individual who had remained at the bar was some fifteen feet toward the far end. He had a whisky bottle and a glass in front of him, but was making no move toward pouring himself a drink just now. Instead, he was watching the central three with intent, sardonic eyes. He was a long bodied man, lank about the middle, and his stringy hair, hanging ragged at his shirt collar, was coarse and rusty looking. He had a narrow face with a small, hooked nose and a tight slit of a mouth. A heavy gun sagged low along his right leg.

Wade, his eyes now mastering the half light of the place, took in all these factors with a swift, flickering survey. He saw more. He saw that the two riders facing the reckless speaker at the bar were none other than Burt Krug and Rocky Gentry. And though they were two to one and had their man virtually between them, they were plainly reluctant to force the issue.

The lank, pale-eyed rider further along the bar cursed in sudden thin contempt.

"What's the matter with you two? If you expect to ride with me you got to show more spine than this. I wouldn't let God Almighty, let alone Bill Vessels, talk to me that way—and take it!"

Bill Vessels! The name hit sharply at Stagmire. This big, rawboned, reckless fellow was a man who had once ridden for Gib Dawson, and who Dawson was wishing wistfully was back on the Anchor payroll!

Now Bill Vessels pushed a little forward from the bar, turning slightly so that he might watch not only the two in front of him, but also the lank, pale-eyed speaker.

Vessels' returning words ran just as rough and reckless as before. "Everything I said about these two goes double for you, Mabry. What are you so damn proud about? You steal 'em for Lawrey and Lawrey sells 'em to Tedrow. You're all in the same litter, all in the same basket of snakes."

A hushed sigh ran over the room. Men crowded back a little further. The lank one with the pale and strangely cruel eyes backed away from the bar two long, careful steps.

"Well, now," he droned. "We'll see about this!"

Things were in the pot for sure now.

And the pot was boiling savagely and about to run over. Every man in the place knew it, and none more surely than Wade Stagmire. It was strictly none of his affair, yet that man yonder was Bill Vessels, a good man, according to Gib Dawson. Too good, thought Wade bleakly, to go into this thing alone.

THROUGH this one long moment of suspended stillness which filled the room with an almost intolerable strain, Wade's voice drifted, soft, yet penetrating. "Yeah, we'll see about it. And we'll keep it reasonably even. Three to one is just too damned stiff to swallow. Cut it fine, mister, cut it fine!"

The lank one, Price Mabry, went very still. He seemed to hold his breath for a moment, then let it out in a faint, sibilant hiss. His narrow face came slowly around, but he made no other move. Wade watched him unwinkingly.

"Yeah," murmured Wade. "It's you I mean—you!"

Price Mabry had a reputation along this wild coast country. It wasn't any kind of reputation to be proud of, but it was one which most men were careful to walk around. Price Mabry was no coward. There was a black, perverted pride in the man which wouldn't let him be that, at least not publicly. Privately there was no telling, for what went on deep within the dark recesses of this man's mind and soul, no other man could ever guess.

Yet, when it came to gunplay, Mabry was coldly realistic. He knew his own capabilities in such matters and had his own confidence in them. But it had been a life-long rule of his never to test the capabilities of another man until he'd had a chance to study that man and arrive at a satisfactory estimate.

To Mabry, Wade Stagmire was a complete stranger, a man he had never laid eyes on before. And the unknown, as Price Mabry had come to realize, could be highly dangerous—particularly where violence and gunplay were concerned.

In addition, the physical setup was wrong. The enemy was at his back. If Mabry wanted to force the issue now, he'd have to turn to shoot. Wade Stagmire didn't have to turn. That made a difference, the difference between living and dying. So Price Mabry, swiftly weighing all these things, now stepped back to the bar, poured himself a drink and downed it.

Wade moved up beside him, on his right side and just a trifle to the rear, smart enough to hold his advantage. He threw a swift glance along the bar, meeting Bill Vessels' wondering eyes.

"Now, friend," said Wade, "you can clear the room and the air."

Bill Vessels knew what he meant. The big fellow put all his attention on Burt Krug and Rocky Gentry. "Git!" he ordered harshly. "Light a shuck! You might have had ideas a minute ago, but you've changed them by now. I know it and you know it. Git!"

They didn't argue. At Wade's first words they had, like Price Mabry, swung startled heads, and found themselves looking at the same man who had taken Virg Trautwine apart out at Anchor headquarters. They had sensed the unknown, just as Price Mabry had, and had seen just enough of it to want no further part in it at the moment. In addition, the odds had changed. The two men turned, shuffled to the door.

Bill Vessels followed them to the door, held it partly open, watched for a moment to make sure that they were really on their way. Then he came back to the bar, dropping in on the left side of Price Mabry.

"Now then, Mabry," he drawled, "what was it you were saying?

Price Mabry gave no answer. He poured himself another drink, took a coin from his pocket, spun it along the bar. Then he backed away, keeping his hands strictly neutral. His voice held that same thin drone as before.

"Hell with you, Vessels!" His pale, cruel glance ran up and down Wade Stagmire, measuring, storing things away in that dark mind. "And if you stay in these parts, mister, there'll come another time. Then we'll see!"

He turned and went out, spur rowels scuffing.

NOW THE ROOM seemed to brighten. Men's voices held silent before threw out a quick chattering, a trifle high pitched from bottled-up strain. Some moved to the bar, others back to interrupted card games. The bartender, a short, paunchy man with thinning hair, wiped his face with the tail of his apron, clattered bottles and glasses noisily.

"Bill," he said to Vessels, "only a reckless idiot like you would spit in the devil's eye. Ma-an! You had me scared!"

"Had myself scared, Obie," admitted Vessels candidly. "But the day I walk around Price Mabry, that day I ain't fit to live any longer. Those other two—" Vessels shrugged—"they're what I called 'em—lice!"

Vessels turned to face Wade Stagmire fully. "I don't know why you did it, friend, but I know you did. I ain't fooling myself about the spot I'd got into, but I sure was in one. Everything I said about Price Mabry being a damn thief is true enough. Now I'm adding that he's bad medicine any way you take him, particularly with a gun. Which I hope you'll remember. Nothing much I can do by way of thanking you, outside of saying it and then buying you a drink. What'll you have? Me, I'm Bill Vessels."

"Stagmire here, Wade Stagmire. Glad to know you, Vessels. Gib Dawson was telling me about you."

"Gib Dawson! You know him?"

"Riding for him," nodded Stagmire.

"The devil! I can't figure that. Those two, Krug and Gentry, they're Anchor hands. How come you didn't—."

"They were Anchor hands," cut in Wade, smiling briefly. "So was a fellow named Trautwine. Gib fired all of them, today."

"Well!" grunted Vessels, "that's news. I thought Dawson figgered them as three fair-haired boys. How come he give them their time?"

"Found out they were selling him out to a guy named Lawrey, Frank Lawrey."

"Hah! So the old fool finally woke up, did he? Me and a couple of others tried to wise him up some time ago to the particular breed of rats those three were. But he wouldn't listen to us. Serves him right."

Wade poured himself a short drink. He lifted the glass, stared at it, spinning the liquor in it.

"Gib Dawson," he said softly, "is a mighty fine man. But being tied down with a bad leg like he is, unable to get around and see to his own interests personally, having to leave all that sort of thing up to hired hands and being worked on all the time the way he has been by this fellow Frank Lawrey—well, Gib Dawson can be excused a few mistakes in judgment. I wonder if you or I, Vessels, were we in Dawson's boots, wouldn't make worse ones?"

Vessels downed his drink. "You're driving at something, friend. What?"

Wade spun a cigarette into shape, picking his words carefully.

"Gib Dawson told me about how he happened to let you go, you and a couple of riders named Harley Jacks and Buck Hare. He said he'd realized since that he'd made a bad mistake there, admitting that you were three damned good men. And he wishes he had you back, all of you, riding for him."

BILL VESSELS accepted tobacco and papers from Wade, built a smoke for himself. "The darned old fool!" he growled. "I liked Gib Dawson, liked him a heap. Still do, I reckon. But when a man you've ridden for and given your best for turns on you and brands you as crooked and gives you your time—well—" Vessels shrugged.

"An old man, tied down with a crippled leg, being pushed around and robbed at every turn," said Wade softly. "But a damn good man and one not afraid to admit he was wrong."

Vessels swung his head, laid an intent glance at Wade. "Maybe he sent you to town to try and locate me or Harley or Buck?"

"That's right, he did," Wade admitted, his eyes smiling back at Vessels.

"Maybe that's why you stepped into that threatened ruckus, siding with me?

You heard Price Mabry name me. You figger that out of gratitude for that—"

"No! Not for that reason. But I liked the damn fool reckless way you threw it back at those fellows and, well, it was three to one." Wade shrugged.

Bill Vessels stared thoughtfully at the back bar mirror. "When Gib Dawson let us go, Harley and Buck and me, we figgered to put in together and start a little spread of our own in Wind Pike Valley. It's been tough sledding. We got a few cows together. Those cows were ours up to three days ago. They're gone now."

Vessels paused, inhaled deeply. "The three of us were on the upper end of our range, fencing in some springs. A two day job and a good fifteen miles from headquarters. Rather than ride back and forth for grub and blankets, we camped overnight on the job. That's where we made our mistake. Lawrey musta had somebody spying on us. Anyhow, while we were away those two days, they cleaned our lower range where our cows were. So now we got a range, but no cattle and no money." Vessels poured himself another drink, his face moody.

"You name this fellow Lawrey as responsible for it all," said Wade. "You're sure of that?"

Vessels jerked his head emphatically. "Plumb sure! He's the only one in these parts who could pull a steal like that and get away with it. He's got the men, the means and a market handy for the stuff."

"Selling to Hubbard, you mean?"

"Not direct to Hubbard, of course, but to Ruel Tedrow who does the buying for Hubbard's logging camps and mill boarding houses. Which amounts to the same thing."

"How many cattle did you and your partners lose?" asked Wade.

"About eighty head. Not much of a herd by some standards, mebbe. But it was a start that we figgered to build on. Every thin dime we had in the world was tied up in those cattle. So now," ended Vessels, with a wry grimace, "me and Harley and Buck are three very down and out saddle pounders, all done with dreaming, back to the hard realities of a damn tough world."

"There's a job for all three of you at Anchor, if you're interested," said Wade. "I hope you are."

"What good would that do us?" brooded Vessels. "Gib Dawson can't last. He's getting near the end of his string, too. Time Frank Lawrey gets through with him, he won't be no better off than we are."

"If Gib Dawson goes down," said Wade Stagmire with slow emphasis, "if he does —then he'll go down fighting, and me and one damn good Indian, Noyo, we'll go down with him. But somebody will know they've been in a wild waltz by the time that happens."

"I like your spirit, but can't say much for your judgment," said Vessels dryly. "You can't fight Frank Lawrey, which means fighting Ruel Tedrow too, which means fighting Jared Hubbard. Too much money, too much power there. Frank Lawrey will end up owning every decent piece of range in fifty miles along this coast. After he busts everybody else, that range will be his for the taking."

"All the range a dead man owns," said Wade, a new, cold note coming into his voice, "is a piece six feet long and three feet wide. Could be that this Frank Lawrey will find that out."

Again Bill Vessels put his glance intently on Wade. "You really mean to go after Lawrey, don't you?"

"That's right. I ride this thing through with Gib Dawson, regardless. I wish you were riding with us, Vessels."

Vessels stared down, slid a foot back and forth along the boot rail. Finally his head came up. "Mebbe I'm a damn fool, but you got a look about you, Stagmire, which I like. I'll talk things over with Harley and Buck. I ain't promising a thing, understand. But mebbe you'll be seeing us, out at Anchor."

"We'll drink on that hope," Wade said quickly. "And I'll buy this one, Bill."

They drank, looked at each other and then, moved by a common impulse, shook hands.

Vessels grinned crookedly. "You could sell spectacles to a blind Injun, fella. Tell Gib Dawson to break out the fatted calf.

And for yourself, don't make no mistake about Price Mabry. You made him take water today. But don't you ever overlook the fact that he's a plumb bad one, bad from any angle you see him!"

JARED HUBBARD was a slender, precise man, with neatly trimmed iron grey hair. He was addicted to well-tailored grey suits and starched, immaculate linen. His features were fine boned, well and evenly cut. He would have been a very handsome man if his rather colorless face had reflected more of geniality and less of severity and if it had not shown a shadowy, but very real and unbending pride.

His life was the big lumbering concern of which he was the absolute head, his passion the efficient functioning of that concern and the solid handling of the profits this efficient functioning built up.

His one weakness and real extravagance was his niece, Stewart. Nothing was too good for her. There were those, however, who vowed this concern for the girl's welfare was due more to Jared Hubbard's burning desire to assure that the future of the Hubbard lumber empire should remain forever in the Hubbard family, rather than because of any real fondness for the girl herself.

This assumption was both partly right and partly wrong. Jared Hubbard did plan for the furtherance of Hubbard interests in Hubbard hands, but he also, to the allowable extent of his self-centered nature, knew a real affection for his niece. A widower of many years standing, and childless, he had high hopes for Stewart.

On this clear and sunny afternoon, the two of them were alone in his big and expensively appointed office. The office was a second story affair, built so that from its windows Jared Hubbard could look out across the drying yards to the big mill, throbbing and humming with activity. Sometimes he would sit for hours, just looking at this enterprise he had built.

Now his niece was standing at one of the windows, looking not at the mill or the drying yards, but beyond all this to the far and shining sea. Her slim shoulders were very straight, and there was a faint shadow of impatience and discomfort in her wide grey eyes. She spoke without turning.

"Please understand, Uncle Jared, that I fully appreciate all the kindnesses you've shown me, all the things you've done for me. But I'm definitely not interested in any thought of marriage, and I will not be until the right man comes along. So far I haven't met him."

Jared Hubbard stood beyond his desk, hands clasped behind him.

"There are," he said with his usual precise manner, "more things to be considered about a thoughtful and sound marriage than the mere question of love, Stewart. There are certain responsibilities one owes to his or her name and family.

"You are fully aware of my strong desire to see the Hubbard interests carried on within the family," he went on, "and while I do not underestimate your clear-headedness and common sense and yes, your business acumen, I can't help but feel that the proper management of Hubbard affairs might be a little beyond you. I feel that you would need the help of a man trained in the organization and capable of not only holding the business together, but also of expanding and strengthening it. There is such a man."

Stewart turned and faced him. "You're referring to Ruel Tedrow, of course," she said quietly. "I like Ruel, Uncle Jared. But I definitely do not love him, and I'll never marry a man I do not love. Perhaps my ideas in such things are old-fashioned, but as I see it, any marriage not truly based on love, regardless of its material advantages, would be a mockery of the worst sort. Now, if you don't mind, we'll drop a subject that is becoming unpleasant to both of us."

Jared Hubbard's lips tightened. Here was an obstacle he could neither solve nor climb over, and he didn't like such obstacles. His sense of planning and efficient management was offended. He had planned this thing for years, and he was not one to give up easily.

Stewart had turned to the window again and Jared Hubbard stared at her uncompromising back. In some ways, the years of schooling in the East had changed this niece of his a great deal, in others not at all.

The strong streak of independence of thought which she had shown back when she was just a long-legged, harum-scarum youngster, galloping her pinto pony along some foaming, spume-sprinkled beach, black hair flying in the wind, eyes sparkling and cheeks glowing with the sheer joy of living, was still in her. Even as a child she could be led, but never driven, and in these things, Jared Hubbard reflected, the human spirit never changed.

"There is, of course," he meditated, "no immediate rush in this matter, and I did not intend to convey the idea that there was. But I do want you to think over your responsibilities, Stewart, and be guided by the convictions you must arrive at."

Her reply was quiet but firm. "My sense of responsibilities, Uncle Jared, will never outweigh the wisdom of my heart. I'm not at all sure that I like the lumbering industry at all. This morning I rode out with Ruel to see some loggers fell a redwood. It was a patriach among trees, something that had been growing and living for hundreds, perhaps a thousand years. Now it is gone, and I can't forget how empty the sky looked after the felling."

Jared Hubbard laughed in sheer disbelief. "You can't be serious, my dear. Why, the needs of man—"

She turned and stopped him with an impatient wave of her hand. "I know. I've heard that before, Uncle Jared. Maybe such things are necessary. But I don't have to like them. As it stood, the tree was magnificent, majestic. Fallen and cut up into lumber, there will be merely some more houses, and some of them pretty shoddy, too. I'm afraid," she ended, with a weary little smile, "that I'm a great disappointment to you, Uncle Jared."

Before he could answer her, the door of the office opened and Jared Hubbard's secretary, a mousy, thin-faced little woman, slipped in.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hubbard, but there's a man in the outer office who insists on seeing you. A Mr. Stagmire. He—he is a very determined young man. He refuses to believe you are too busy to see him. What shall I do with him?"

Stewart Hubbard seemed relieved at the interruption. "I'm sure Uncle Jared isn't too busy now, Miss Murdock. He and I have had our talk."

Jared Hubbard's face tightened and there was anger in his stride as he stamped up to his desk. "Stagmire!" he snapped. "I never heard the name before. But—show him in."

IF WADE STAGMIRE was in any way impressed by the elegance of Jared Hubbard's office, he did not show it. But he did give a slight start of surprise at sight of the same girl who had, that morning, given him directions to Gib Dawson's Anchor Ranch.

He whipped off his hat, tipped his head toward her slightly, then faced Jared Hubbard, who was plainly startled at seeing a gun-carrying cowboy stride into his office. Wade wasted no time in getting down to business.

"I'm Wade Stagmire. I ride for Gib Dawson's Anchor outfit. There's a question of stolen cattle I want to talk over with you, Mr. Hubbard."

Hubbard gave the appearance of one who could hardly believe his own ears. "Stolen cattle, Mr. Stagmire?" he said. "I'm afraid I don't understand you. What conceivable interest would I have in stolen cattle? This is the office of a lumbering industry, sir."

"The stolen cattle, Mr. Hubbard, end up as beef on the tables of your logging camps and mill boardinghouses. A lot of Gib Dawson's cattle have ended up there, and I'm suggesting that you put a stop to that sort of business."

Hubbard laughed thinly. "Mr. Stagmire, are you joking? If you are, I've no further time for it."

Wade shook his head. "Far from a joke. Anchor cattle have been and are being stolen by one Frank Lawrey, who slaughters the critters and then sells the beef to

you through a man named Ruel Tedrow. It's your money that buys that beef, Mr. Hubbard, and you are certainly in a position to put a stop to it."

A glint of anger replaced the momentary bewilderment that had shown in Hubbard's eyes. "Sir, I resent your statements. By direct inference you are accusing my general superintendent, Mr. Tedrow, of dishonest dealings, and dragging me into it, also. Let me tell you, sir, that Ruel Tedrow is a thoroughly honest man in whom I place the greatest confidence. Let me tell you also, that the Hubbard logging and lumbering organization does not need to deal in anything off color or in any way unsavory. I resent your words and I resent your presence. You will kindly leave!"

Wade did not move. "Then you refuse to look into this matter and put a stop to it, Mr. Hubbard?"

"I refuse to believe you even know what you're talking about, sir," snapped Jared Hubbard.

Wade shrugged. "Sorry you feel this way about things, Mr. Hubbard. But if you refuse to do anything about the matter, then Anchor is going to have to. And it may get rough."

Hubbard stiffened. "Are you trying to threaten me? You'd dare, in my own office?"

"No. Not threatening you or anyone else. Just stating a few facts."

Wade turned to leave, his glance touching the girl who stood watching him, sober and wide of eye. Just a glimmer of a smile softened the bleakness of his face.

"Thanks again for the directions you gave me this morning, Miss Hubbard. They led me straight to that meal I was needing so badly—and to a job. Gib Dawson sends his best and wishes you'd come visiting him again like you used to, riding a little paint pony."

Color whipped across Stewart Hubbard's face, but she did not answer. Wade tipped his head again to her, but before he could leave there came the sound of brisk, solid steps in the outer office and then a big man with heavy shoulders, a florid face and a shock of tawny hair came in.

FOR A MOMENT pure surprise held Ruel Tedrow. He stared at Stagmire, then questioningly switched his glance to Jared Hubbard. Hubbard spoke with thin satisfaction.

"Glad you happened in, Ruel. This fellow here has been giving me some intolerable nonsense about us feeding stolen beef to our logging and mill crews. Of course I don't believe him and I've told him so. Have you anything to add?"

"Yes, Mr. Hubbard, I have," Tedrow said sharply. "And I'll deliver it in my own way if you don't mind."

Tedrow whirled to Wade, anger flashing across the broad ruddiness of his face, his shoulders swinging with hard, truculent arrogance.

"There's been a lot of that loose sort of talk going around for some time now, and I'm heartily sick and tired of it, mister. I buy every pound of beef that goes on the tables of our crews and I happen to know that it's honest beef. Now I don't know what penny-ante, two-bit rancher you're putting up your howl for, but I do know you're peddling lies. And if I hear any more of them, then somebody is going to get hurt—bad!"

Wade looked Ruel Tedrow up and down with a flat, cold stare. He spoke almost softly. "Mister, I hear a big wind blowing. Go easy with who you call a liar. We'll let it pass this time because we're where we are and with other people present. But go easy! *Sabe?*"

Tedrow had come up in the Hubbard organization the hard way and had left his mark on many a rough and tumble logger or mill hand.

There was nothing in a physical way about this lean, brown cowboy to give him pause, but there was a certain something in the cowboy's eyes which told Tedrow to leave well enough alone. For one of the few real whippings Tedrow had ever taken in his life had come from a man who had that same wickedly cold glint in his eyes, and Tedrow had never forgotten it. Sheer spirit could make a lot of things even, it seemed.

It was Jared Hubbard who gave Ruel

Tedrow a chance to back away gracefully.

"We'll leave any talk of violence out of this, Ruel. The charge is of course, preposterous, and I can fully appreciate why you should be angry. Such talk is annoying, but as long as there is nothing to it, we can afford to ignore it. I hope, Mr. Stagmire, that you are now fully satisfied that there is nothing to your outrageous claim. You have my word for it and you have Mr. Tedrow's to back mine up."

Then Hubbard added, dryly sarcastic, "As I said before, our business is lumbering, not cattle rustling. Good day, Mr. Stagmire!"

GIB DAWSON hunched over the supper table, cradling his coffee cup in both gnarled hands and peering at Wade from under shaggy brows. "You mean to say you actually tackled Jared Hubbard in his own private office! Son, how'd you manage it?"

Wade shrugged. "Just followed my nose until I found him. Long as I was in Castle City I figured it was worth the try to get at our trouble through him. But I didn't have any luck. He was plenty emphatic about only honest beef being served his crews."

"Hah!" grunted Gib Dawson. "We know better. Sometimes I wonder if he's as honest as I think he is. What would your guess be?"

"That's a pretty big layout he's the head of," answered Wade, soberly thoughtful. "No man could have his finger on all the details of a business that size. He has to trust somebody to take care of them for him, and he trusts Ruel Tedrow."

"Would you?"

Wade smiled grimly, shook his head. "I don't like Mr. Ruel Tedrow, don't like him at all. Nobody has a right to any opinion but Mr. Tedrow. He's out to make you take his word for a thing, even if he has to beat your head in to do it."

"Ruel Tedrow is crooked," declared Gib Dawson flatly. "But make no mistake about it, he's a rough, tough customer. He didn't get to where he is by being a gentle lily. A damn mean man in a fight, that feller."

"Stewart Hubbard was there," said Wade, smiling a little at the memory. "I told her you sent your best and hoped she'd come out to visit you again."

"What did she say to that?"

"She didn't say a word. That was when Tedrow came in. I may be wrong in this, but somehow I had the feeling when I first went into Hubbard's office that he and his niece had been having a little argument about something and that Hubbard had come out second best."

Gib Dawson chuckled. "He'd probably been trying to make up Stewart's mind for her on something. You'd think he'd learn better by this time. Nobody but herself makes up that girl's mind on anything. She always was an independent little monkey. Her and me, we sure used to get along fine."

Wade, finished with his supper, leaned back and rolled a smoke. "Saw Bill Vessels in town."

Gib Dawson straightened in his chair. "How'd that happen?"

Wade sketched briefly the affair in the Cattleman Saloon.

Dawson swore softly. "So you sided Bill against Price Mabry and those two whelps, Krug and Gentry, eh? Boy, that Mabry is a bad one."

"So Vessels said," nodded Wade. "Gib, we may have Vessels and Harley Jacks and Buck Hare back with us."

Dawson's eyes gleamed. "You really think there's a chance?"

"I think so. Their cattle ranch venture in Wind Pike Valley has gone bust, according to Vessels. They've been rustled blind. Vessels was sure that Frank Lawrey was behind it. I think I sold Vessels on the idea of tying up with Anchor again, so we could fight Lawrey together."

"Boy, I hope so!" exclaimed Dawson. "I'm plumb ready to eat humble crow if those three boys will only drop their saddles here again."

That night Wade slept in a real bed again for the first time in weeks. It had been a long and eventful day. The start had hardly been auspicious. It had been a cold, hungry and friendless one. And then Wade

had happened on the slash where the big redwood was being felled, and there had met a girl with raven black hair and lovely grey eyes and she had given him trail directions.

It seemed, mused Wade sleepily, that his luck had changed the moment he met Stewart Hubbard. This was a pleasant thought and he was considering it when Noyo, the Indian, came quietly into the bunkhouse and closed the door against a damp, chill wind that had begun to blow, throwing its moist breath blusteringly about the place.

"Fog tomorrow morning," said Noyo as he went along to his bunk.

NOYO KNEW his weather. Wade dressed the next morning in a grey, chill half light, then stepped out of the bunkhouse into a world muffled and drowned in dripping mists. It was as though a great, wet wool fleece had been lowered against the earth, through which Wade had to almost feel his way to the cookshack, where Noyo, already up, had breakfast going.

Wade washed up, then crowded the stove with outstretched hands. Gib Dawson came in, his crutch creaking.

"Rustler's delight, this fog," growled the old fellow. "Them who know the country and the trails could run off with half a ranch and you'd never know it was gone until the sun came out again."

Noyo poured a cup of steaming coffee, held it out to Dawson, who, after the first long swallow, began to thaw. "Fog's good for the grass, though," he said, his tone milder. "Keeps it green along the slopes."

Noyo glanced at Wade, a faint smile touching his brown, usually impassive face. Wade grinned back. Noyo knew how to open the day for his boss.

As they sat down to eat, Gib Dawson asked, "You got any special ideas for the day, son?"

"Thought I'd do a little riding," answered Wade. "Get acquainted with the country and the lay of Anchor range. Also get a line on our cattle."

Dawson nodded. "We take in all this valley and over the next ridge as far as Hester Creek. The valley range is the best, of course, but that to the north ain't bad, either. You get across the ridge and you run into heavy timber—a stand of big redwood that'll knock your eye out. But on the south side of the ridge there's plenty of open country. And the cattle seem to like it there, mebbe because it's warmer. The south ridge that you came in over yesterday morning that's all Hubbard timber holdings, and they're cutting heavy up there."

Dawson paused, taking a big drag at his coffee cup. "That stand of redwood that falls inside our line over along Hester Crick, there's plenty board feet in it—plenty! Hubbard would like to get hold of it. Fact is, one day a while back, Ruel Tedrow stopped in here and wanted to know what I'd take for it. I sure told that jigger where to go, y'betcha."

"In the past, just how has Frank Lawrey's crowd worked against you, Gib?" Wade asked. "I mean before Trautwine and Krug and Gentry took to selling you out?"

Dawson shrugged. "Just about any way he could pick up a jag of cows and get clear with them. On their own, the cattle don't get into timber much. Not enough feed there. But they graze all along the edge of it. Not much of a trick for some of Lawrey's crowd to be prowling just inside the timber, spot some cattle feeding close in, make a quick gather of ten or fifteen head, head 'em back along some timber trail and haze 'em out to the coast."

"Those cattle would certainly leave a trail," said Wade.

"Uh-huh," grunted the old cattleman. "They would. Trouble is, by the time you miss 'em and pick up that trail, they're long gone."

"But you could still follow it and it would have to lead somewhere," persisted Wade.

"Sure it would. Right out to some cove or headland, and there it would end. No cattle, no nothing. Oh, I know what you're thinking, son—that those cattle, wherever they were, would still be packing an Anchor

brand. When I first began losing cows and figgered that Lawrey was the man responsible, I made me a trip, bum leg and all, down to his Wagon Wheel layout.

"I demanded the right to look around," the old man continued. "Lawrey, damn his slippery soul, was polite and agreeable as all hell. He even hooked up a buckboard and drove me all over his ranch himself. He knew what I was looking for and he knew I wouldn't find any. Anchor brands, I mean. Because that wasn't the way he was working on me."

DAWSON was silent for a few mouthfuls. "I came up with the answer later. Take a day like this one. With this fog. Back here, inland, the fog will probably thin out by noon and the sun be shining. But out on the coast proper it'll be thick as soup and may lay that way for days at a time. All right! Lawrey sees a fog is due. So he sends some of his fine thieves out to work. They lift a few head of Anchor cows, chouse 'em out to the coast. They make an open slaughter of 'em, out on some headland. They got the cover of the fog to work in. They skin out the carcasses, chuck the hides into the sea.

"Lawrey has a wagon handy. The meat is hauled in to the cold house he's got in Castle City where he hangs it for a time, before distributing it to Hubbard's camps and boardinghouses. With the hide off, beef's beef. We can't prove a damn thing. There you have it. That beef ain't cost Lawrey a damn cent outside the expense of running it off, slaughtering it and hanging it. Nice profit for him in that kind of business."

Wade, finished with his meal, built a cigarette, his eyes narrowed with thought.

"You paint a tough deal to stop," he admitted. "Proving ownership under those conditions would be rough, even if Jared Hubbard was open to be convinced, which right now he don't seem to be. We're going to have to get right down to fundamentals, Gib. We got to do our best to catch the thieves in the act and then really work them over."

The old cattleman nodded emphatically. "That's right! Ketch 'em cold and put the fear of God into 'em. But that won't be easy, either. I tell you, Frank Lawrey's a fox."

Wade went out to catch and saddle. It was still a grey wet world, but the fog had thinned a little here around headquarters. Even so, when Wade dropped down to the river and headed east along it, working inland through the valley, a scant hundred yards was about the limit of vision.

The fog seemed to restrict sound as well as sight. Wade rode through a muffled world, hearing only the subdued thump of his horse's hoofs and the vaguest of faint splashings where the river foamed over a shallows. Birds, startled by his ghostly approach, flitted away, voiceless. Little bunches of cattle, stirring from bedding grounds, were real one moment, then vanishing phantoms the next.

Wade kept to the valley flats until they began pinching in, the black mass of timber on his right, sharply down-pitched, but open slopes to his left.

He reined left and angled up these slopes. He struck a cattle trail that wound and twisted, crossing low points and ridges, slicing through sweeping gulleys, but always gradually climbing.

He took his time, letting his mount set its own gait. There was no rush in what he was about. A man, committed to what could very well be a battleground, was smart to learn the lay of the land. It was important that he get the feel of the country, a sense of proper direction, even if he rode it in the black of night or through a gray fog blanket like this one.

Here, as Gib Dawson had prophesied on this open slope, Wade began seeing more and more cattle. They grazed on long running benches, in sweeping sheltered hollows and once, he met a file of them heading down to the river to drink. They scattered, drifted past him on both sides, and the fog swallowed them up behind him. The bawl of a critter echoed shortly along the slope, a muffled, lonely sound.

In time, as he continued this upward, circling climb, Wade moved out of a world

of hovering stillness. The fog was no longer a motionless thing, but began streaming past in long, wet banners. For up here there was a wind blowing, sliding in from the sea, whipping the fog ahead of it. That wind brought a chill on it and Wade, now heading west along the north rim of the valley, began dropping lower and lower as he rode, until finally the wind was above him and he was down in a still grey world once more.

HE KNEW that he had circled well above Anchor headquarters and that the ranch buildings now lay some three or four miles behind him to the east. Soon the valley would begin pinching in again to timbered ridges between which the Sotoyome River flowed to the sea.

Now, of a sudden, Wade picked up sounds. The first, from far up on the south ridge where Hubbard's loggers were working, came as a booming, rumbling crash. And Wade knew that another towering giant of the redwood forest had gone down before the keen bite of ax and saw.

Yet it was a different sound, shortly after, that focused Wade's attention. The bawl of a cow critter. Not the casual plaint of an animal momentarily last or separated from its fellows in the fog, but the sharper, more harried protest of an animal being driven faster than its usual habit of travel.

Wade reared in his saddle, fixed the direction of the sound as near as he could, which was below and ahead of him. He heard it again and lifted his horse to a run.

He was closer to the river than he thought. Within two hundred yards he hit the town trail and raced along it. A moment later he had his horse set back almost on its haunches, for a mounted figure loomed in the fog, holding the center of the trail. Wade instinctively went for his gun, but stopped the move half way, feeling a little foolish. For the rider was Stewart Hubbard!

She was up on a clean limbed sorrel and she sat her saddle straight and well. She was in a divided skirt of dark twill and her scarlet mackinaw was buttoned to the throat. Her head was bare and her raven hair was beaded with a fine silver mist of fog moisture. Her grey eyes were wide and startled at Wade's sudden, headlong approach.

Yet she was alert and thinking, for she twisted in her saddle and pointed. "I heard it, too," she exclaimed. "Over there. Somebody is harrying cattle. Not riders with you?"

"No," said Wade, recovering from his surprise, and knowing a quick surge of satisfaction because of her swift recognition of him. "Not with me. This could be what I was talking to your uncle about yesterday afternoon. Now I got to see!"

He went past her, digging in the spurs, following where she had pointed. Within a hundred yards he was up against a wall of timber, black and dripping in front of him.

He pulled up again, standing high in his stirrups, listening. In the dank timber ahead of him he heard it again, muffled now. An animal's bawl of protest. He sent his horse plunging into the dim fastnesses of the redwoods.

It was dripping and ghostly in here, for the fog had sifted down and the towering trees lifted up and lost their lofty crests in it. Dodging massive trunks, Wade sent his mount slashing through thickets of giant fern which sprayed fog moisture and drenched him to the skin.

He saw movement ahead. Cattle. A rider—two riders. This time Wade did draw his gun. He yelled, his voice weak in the timber. Yet it carried far enough. One of those riders came around. A gun boomed, its report smothered to an echoless thud. A sliver of bark spun off the trunk of a tree beside Wade. So now he was sure.

THE GUN that had been Gib Dawson's belted its challenge twice, the recoil heavy and solid and satisfying in Wade's fist. Gunflame, pale in the murk and gloom, whipped back at him. Wade shot again, and the figure behind that gunflame fell forward along the neck of his horse, balanced there for a moment, then

slithered limply off. The other rider raced off to one side, shouting a hard summons.

Wade went after him, lost him in the trees. Cattle, eight or ten of them, that had been close-bunched, scattered like a covey of startled quail. The timber seemed full of darting movement.

Gunfire broke from three different points ahead of Wade, and he held back a little against such odds. But on one point he was coldly exultant. This was plainly another rustling raid on Anchor cattle and he had broken it up.

Under him he could feel the rapid lift and fall of his horse's hard breathing. While his eyes probed the fog gloom in the timber, he reloaded the empty chambers of his gun. He sent his mount ahead at a walk, looking for another target. He glimpsed an indistinct figure, shot and knew he had missed.

Guns hammered to his right and to his left, and his horse reared, shaking. As it came down, Wade felt a queer breaking up of the animal's strength and coordination, and he knew it was mortally hit. He kicked free of the stirrups and threw himself clear as the horse went down. He sprawled on the wet cushion of the forest mold. The stark realization hit him that the small exultation had been entirely premature.

He rolled away from the now dead horse, came up against a tree, got to his knees and then fully to his feet behind the protection of it. But the raiders had him located. The flat and heavy thudding of guns beat through the timber, and lead whipped at the tree.

Wade realized that this tree would offer only a temporary respite from the raiders' fire. They'd soon be working around to each side of him and get him in a crossfire. He wondered bleakly if his luck could have run out on him so quickly and completely as it now appeared to.

He crouched close against the tree, waiting, moving back and forth as he tried to watch both sides. He was looking to the right when the shot sounded to his left. He felt the bullet tug at his clothes across the small of his back. That close had the slug come!

He drove an answering shot, throwing it blindly, for he saw no target. Then he dove back beside his horse. The bulk of the animal would at least protect him fully on one side while he watched ahead and to the other flank. And being close to the earth this way offered him another advantage. He would be a less distinct target to the raiders than they to him, for they would be up in the saddle.

Gunfire ceased for a moment and deep silence held. The damp smell of the earth came up to him, strong with the mold of centuries. He waited, ears and eyes straining. Now a gun coughed again and the bullet thudded into the bulk of the horse.

Wade made no move to fire back, for he had no target. He knew the raiders were hoping he'd fall bait to that shot and rise up to return it, thus making an open target of himself. He stayed as he was, breath taut in his throat.

Two more bullets bit into the bulk of the horse, one from each side. The one that came in from the right, had it been a foot lower, would have torn into his shoulders. The net was tightening.

Wade could see nothing to his left. His horse's body was in the way. For all he knew, one or several of the raiders could be crawling up on him from that side, but he didn't dare rise up to look. That was what the raider to his right was plainly waiting for, to have Wade come up and make a clear target. Wade had to take a chance on what was going on to his left, while putting all his concentration ahead and to his right.

That gun to his right boomed again and a clot of forest mold humped and spattered just a yard beyond him. And somehow, the way the stuff flew, it gave Wade a line to look along, which was a little to the rear as well as to the right. And he saw his man, afoot, darting from the protection of one tree to another. Wade lifted his gun, waited.

He saw the fellow edge into view, not thirty yards away. Shadowy and indistinct as things were in this fog-shrouded timber, Wade recognized this man. It was Rocky Gentry!

UNTIL this moment Wade had known no particular anger in this thing. He recognized it as a grim deal, another bald rustling stroke against Gib Dawson, which he had been lucky enough to stumble across and break up, though that move had left him in as tight a situation as he'd ever known. He had swapped lead with the raiders and seen one man go down before his gun.

But until now there had been something almost impersonal about it all, a fight against men so shadowy in the wet murk as to be almost unreal.

It was different, now. Yonder was Rocky Gentry, once an Anchor hand himself, but a traitorous one, now gone openly over to the enemy. This injected a new note into the business and stirred a cold anger in Wade. He pushed up on his left elbow to get a clearer view of Gentry.

The move caught Gentry's eye and he threw a blindingly fast shot. Wade felt the lead burn across his ribs. The shock drove him back against the bulk of the dead animal he lay beside. He rocked up again on his left elbow, gun pushed level and questing. He saw Rocky Gentry across the sights of the weapon, saw Gentry chopping down for another shot.

Wade had a strange sense of deliberateness about his own shot. The muzzle of his gun steadied, then leaped up and back in recoil, momentarily blotting out his target. Then it dropped back down once more and Wade could see Gentry again.

Gentry was down on his knees, bent forward. His hands were pawing aimlessly at the forest mold in front of him, as though the fellow was looking for something he'd lost. Then Gentry salaamed very low, fell over on the point of his right shoulder, flattened out and was still.

A bitter, rage-filled yell cut through the timber, carrying the first distinct words Wade had heard since this affair began.

"Rush him—everybody! Rush that damn proud—" The words ran out in scalding profanity.

Wade drew his knees up under him, ready to lunge one way or the other.

This was it!

(*To be continued in the next issue*)

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## INDIAN DESERTERS

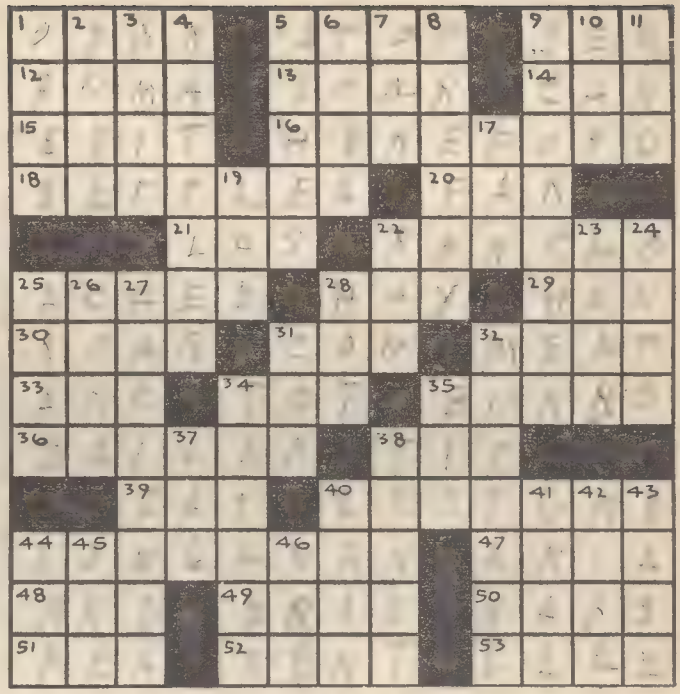
**IN 1867, the Cheyennes were waging a bitter war against the United States. This tribe and the Sioux were very warm friends, and a portion of the Brulé band of Sioux was anxious to join them. Spotted Tail, who was at that time head chief of the Brulés, did all in his power to prevent this. Yet in spite of his influence and power he awoke one morning to hear the sad news. Twenty or more lodges of the Indians who wanted to go on the warpath had just vanished.**

**Assembling his soldiers, Spotted Tail pursued the fugitives, overtook and captured them. Every deserting warrior and many of the women were whipped. Their horses were killed, weapons broken or confiscated and all their lodges, robes, property, and clothing of every description destroyed. He drove the naked deserters back to his camp in a pathetic condition.**

**Under the Indian ruling of that time, this was a perfectly just and proper thing to do. Yet had the deserters succeeded in getting away to the Cheyenne camp, they would have been free from blame and in no present or future danger from Spotted Tail.**

——*Harold Gluck*

# THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



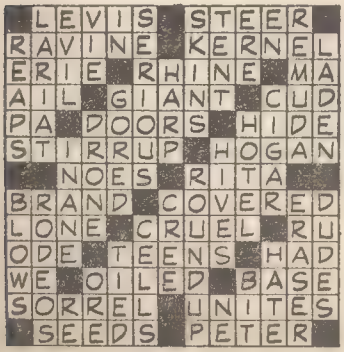
*The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue*

## ACROSS

1. Scent
5. Up above
9. To observe
12. Mountain lion
13. To fly high
14. Is able
15. To prepare for publication
16. Breed of white-faced cattle
18. Colonizes
20. Normal value
21. —— Vegas, Nevada
22. Southwestern cattle farm
25. Pained steadily
28. Horse food
29. Chicken
30. To bellow
31. Calf's mother
32. Edible flesh
33. Curved line
34. Toddler
35. Western pack-animal
36. Dipped out water
38. It is (contr.)
39. To dine
40. To motion while talking
44. Breed of Texas cattle
47. Operatic solo
48. In addition
49. Great Lake
50. Dozes
51. Green vegetable
52. To lease
53. Merriment

## DOWN

1. Opens (poet.)
2. Would-be cowboy
3. To leave out
4. Poisonous western snake
5. Remains of a fire
6. Pedal digits
7. Rowing implement
8. To pay in advance
9. Branding iron
10. Organ of hearing
11. To finish
17. Cooling device
19. Boy
22. Uncooked
23. To listen to
24. Upon
25. Native of Arabia
26. Girl's name
27. Span.-American estate
28. Torrid
31. Food fish
32. Half-wild horse
34. Horse's grazing rope
35. Encore
37. To loiter
38. Doctrine
40. Broad smile
41. Russian mountains
42. Mature
43. Comfort
44. To lick up
45. Half of two
46. Native mineral




*Solution to puzzle in preceding issue*

*WHEN A PRETTY YOUNG LADY is left alone and almost penniless in a rough man's country, what else can she be but a . . .*

# MANAGING WOMAN

*By Dorothy Roseborough*

SICKNESS dogged the wagon train from the day it left Independence. The company, taking advantage of an early spring, and so the hope of sufficient forage for the animals, were three weeks on their way when a piercing wind howled down from the north, bringing heavy snow, and, later, a still and icy calm.

The wagons were halted for five days, and during that time an epidemic of illness broke out. Among the children, measles spread like a flame from one family to another, also infecting many of the older people. Seven children and three adults were buried at that unlucky camp. And among them was Bethenia Evans' young husband, Jim.

It was a strange thing to see Bethenia at Jim's grave side, watching without a tear as the men covered him with hastily laid planks. She looked on silently as they finished with broken brush and stamped-down layers of dirt.

She asked in a calm gentle voice, "Will he be—safe?"

They nodded. She turned away without another word, climbed into her wagon, and, pulling down the canvas flap, was not seen again until the call to break camp the next morning.

Most people thought Bethenia plain until they looked into her brown eyes. In them was a dark beauty and, in spite of their quiet steadfast quality, they were quick to light in laughter. Then it was easy to call Beth a pretty girl. Some men thought her beautiful, although they themselves might have been puzzled to give the reason why.

Young Dan Fourreau brought in Bethenia's four black mules and hitched them to her wagon. He had been a scout with the

*She sank down, tried to fight back angry tears*

Army and knew Gold Camp, where the train was headed—where he had left his little girl the year before. He touched his hat when Bethenia thanked him.

"Anything I can do," he offered. "I'll help you all I can."

"I'll manage," Bethenia said in that independent way of hers. "You've got plenty to do and I couldn't pay you, Daniel."

He scowled, the red coming up under his dusky skin. "I didn't ask for pay."

Bethenia shook her head. "No. You'd get mighty tired of doing chores for me. Unless," she suggested, "I could cook and wash for you in exchange."

He protested, but Bethenia knew what she wanted, and that was not to be beholden to any man. So they made their bargain and kept it on the long road to California and the gold fields where Jim Evans had thought to make his fortune.

Daniel was well paid for the work he did. And having been a widower for a long time, he appreciated having a woman look after him. Young as she was, Bethenia had a rare skill in cooking. Even over a campfire, with no better fuel than buffalo chips, her iron Dutch oven would turn out a mouth-smacking dried apple pie.

IT WAS a problem to others in the wagon train as to what Beth Evans would do in the gold country. "It's no place for a woman alone," Rose Arey told her. Rose was the captain's wife, and by virtue of her husband's position was willing to give advice on all she knew and a great deal that she did not.

She said, "You'd do better to sell what you have and go home by ship."

Looking round at her belongings, Bethenia laughed.

"I have four mules, two span of oxen and a milch cow. A stove and bedding, flour and dried fruit and bacon. The wagon's a good one, but small. Little enough of anything. If I sold it all and twice as much, I couldn't pay my way back home. And what would I do if I got there?" she asked bitterly. "It took all we had to pay for protection with the company."

"You'd always be able to marry," Rose suggested. "Even if you're not crazy about the man, it's company to be married."

"I won't be lonely. When we get to Gold Camp I'm going to take Daniel's little girl Julie to live with me. A five year old gives any woman company and to spare."

Rose showed a shocked surprise in her plump fair face.

"Dan Fourreau? He's wild as a hawk, that man. But he thinks a heap of the young 'un, to hear him talk. You'll not keep her," Rose phophesied. "He'll steal her away from you before a year is up."

"Well, she's his child," Beth retorted. "We've talked it over, Daniel and me. Julie will be with me while her pa's on the trail. I'll have company, and his mind will be at rest. It'll work out all right," she said placidly, and refused to talk about it any further.

She understood later why Daniel's mind had been uneasy about Julie during the long months of their separation. Gold Camp was a desolate place to see, with its tents and canvas-roofed shacks made of odds and ends of lumber, all scattered like thrown boxes along the sides of a wild rocky canyon.

The woman who had been keeping Julie had the look of dirt and shagginess that marked the men who worked in the river and on its banks, and the child was thin and uncared for.

Daniel hugged the little girl to him, and in the same fierce way, Julie's arms clamped around her father's neck. The two of them, so alike in their dark and silent intensity, shocked Bethenia into a little gasp of surprise. She had never known that savage kind of love the two had for each other.

For an instant she understood, and in that flash realized that her feeling for Jim had been only a sweet and kind affection. She was sorry for him, and knew at the same time a pang of longing and sorrow for herself.

WITH the child sitting beside her, Beth drove up the steep grade of the camp. There's not a house fit to live in, she reflected wearily. Not even a spot to pasture the animals. Already men of the wagon train were quarreling over a place to make camp. There had been several wild brawls between them and earlier settlers.

Daniel pressed his horse alongside the wagon. "Pick yourself a spot," he said, and grinned. "I'll fight for it."

Beth pulled the mules to a halt. "What good is this canyon side to Julie and me?" she asked angrily. "Mud and rocks and drunken men shouting! Can't you do better than that for your girl, Daniel Fourreau?"

"I could if I hadn't sold the land I filed on last year," he said glumly. "What do you want me to do?"

Pushing back his hat, he lounged in the saddle, staring up at her as she sat in the driver's seat, high above the fidgeting mules.

He scowled at her, with his trick of drawing his black brows together, and she began to wonder about him, half-afraid that she had made a mistake in relying so much on this dark untamed man. Because of that uneasiness, womanlike, she began to scold.

"What do you think I am?" she exclaimed, "a drunken miner, to sleep in the mud? Find me a place where Julie and I can keep clean. And pasture for my animals. Am I going to have to buy feed for them?"

"You can stay at Nat Boley's hotel a day or so," Daniel suggested. "Your stock will have to be kept at the livery yard until we can find a cabin for you and Julie to live in."

Beth hesitated. The wooden hotel, an unpainted box-like building with a high false front, was only too evidently the upper story of a saloon.

"I don't like the look of it. But it won't

hurt to talk to Boley. He may know of something."

Daniel nodded. "Stay with the wagon. I'll get him out here."

It did not take long for Beth to decide against doing business with Mr. Boley. The big heavy-set man, well fed and well-dressed in a flashy way, was more than willing to rent a room to her.

But she did not like his too hearty, too familiar manner, and, although Beth knew she was being absurd, she disliked still more the combination of a huge nugget-set diamond pin stuck into the ruffled front of his soiled white shirt. She shook her head when he mentioned the extravagant price for a room and meals in his own restaurant.

"That's more than I am prepared to pay. What I'm looking for is a cabin with pasture for my cow."

Boley's face took on a sullen expression. "Nothing like that here. You'd do better to sell your stock."

"I couldn't do that. Thank you, just the same."

"I'll buy 'em myself if you change your mind." He grinned at her. "Guess you'll think better of it, Mrs. Evans. One way or another, most folk round Gold Camp come to agree with me, I've found." He sauntered into the saloon.

BETH GATHERED up the reins. "The very idea!" she exclaimed. "Did you ever hear of such prices? A dollar for a plate of beans. Seventy-five cents for a potato! I didn't dare ask what the charge is for stabling mules." She laughed, but she was angry and worried too. "You know this place, Daniel. Isn't there any free pasture?"

He thought an instant. "Boley or his men own most everything around here. But out a way there's a little plateau that's no use to gold hunters. There's grass. But you'd have to haul water."

Beth caught back her temper. "Anything would be better than this shanty town," she said, smiling. "Lead the way."

She exclaimed with delight when, topping the ridge of a steep hill, they took a short turn-off to a stretch of rolling grassy plateau. One side fell sheer to the river gorge, a spot too steep for the gold panners.

It was true that she would have to haul water from the lower river, but the pasture was all that could be desired. Already the oxen were grazing, their tongues curling round the long grass in the way of animals that cannot crop low-growing forage with comfort. And Betsy the milch cow was tugging at the rope that tethered her.

Here, high above the shabby make-shift camp, the air was fresh and sweet. The mountains rose, range beyond magnificent range, until they were lost in the haze of distance. In the center of the meadow stood a great lone oak, long dead, its trunk split by lightning.

Daniel jerked his thumb at the gnarled and rotten limbs scattered half hidden in the grass. "No more buffalo chips. There's firewood for a year."

Bethenia drew her wagon close to the huge stump. Climbing down, she took a deep breath of satisfaction.

"Oh, Daniel! This is what I want. We can live in the wagon, Julie and me." She smiled at the child. "It will do her good here. She needs feeding up, to look at her."

"I'll pay you some money, soon as I can," Dan said awkwardly.

"You don't need to for a while. I've still got plenty of supplies. Don't you worry. We'll manage fine."

Daniel stared at her as if he were trying to fit her into a new place in his mind.

"Most every woman wants things," he said. "I never saw a gal yet could be satisfied with just a dead tree and some grass."

"There's a heap of pretty things are free," Beth retorted. "I can do with them for a while."

She did not attempt to explain further, but she saw that Daniel was pleased. Maybe because he likes the plateau too, she thought.

"Talking of things for free," she said, "While you were looking for Boley, some men came to the wagon, wanting to buy milk."

"Milk's mighty scarce out here. Did you sell some?"

"No. I gave them some, fresh from this morning's milking."

Daniel chuckled. "You're a nice woman, Beth, but you didn't show much sense. What was the use in doing that?"

"Plenty, I think." Feeling in her pocket, Beth pulled out a piece of paper. "Here's their names. When you go back to camp, tell them I'm selling milk starting tomorrow evening. They can come and get it right here."

"What did they offer to pay?" the scout asked.

"A dollar a quart." Beth smiled. "Betsy's giving over eight quarts. I figure Julie and me will get along."

"Oh, sure, sure," Daniel agreed dryly. "You're what I'd call a managing woman. You'll make out."

SHE WATCHED him stalk away. His back was very flat and straight, he walked with an air of proud dignity. Like an Indian's his long hair hung to his shoulders. It swung forward as he bent to pick up some of the dead wood.

He's as fine and graceful as a wild animal, she thought.

She sighed, wondering when he would be tame enough so that she could cut off some of that black hair—and thinking that it would be a long time before she would dare suggest doing so.

Going about the business of making camp, Beth staked out the cow a distance away from the wagon, and then laid the cooking utensils near the armload of dry wood which Daniel had thrown down.

"I must go to the Fort," he told her. "I'll see those men on my way out of the camp. You'll have plenty of customers, be sure of that. But I'll still pay for Julie. Think you'll be all right, Bethenia?"

"Why not?" Beth shrugged. "Will you be gone long?"

"Can't tell. But things are quiet. The colonel may not need me now. I'll send you a message if he does."

He swung Julie up in his arms and held her close.

"You be good now. Take care of Miss Beth," he said. Mounting his horse, he rode away.

It was during those long days alone that Bethenia began to love the child. Sensing her affection, Julie responded to it in her fiercely demonstrative fashion. She seldom left Beth's side except when Nat Boley rode to the plateau.

The hotel man had heard of the fresh milk sold by Beth Evans. He found it a good opportunity to see her, and soon began coming in the daytime without making the excuse of buying. Julie did not like him. She would hide in the wagon, refusing to answer Beth's call until the big man went back to Gold Camp.

Boley laughed about it, but it was evident that his vanity was hurt.

"Where's that Fourreau kid?" he asked. "I kissed her one day and she's never forgiven me, I reckon. Not hiding out, is she?"

Beth evaded the question. "Oh, she's off playing somewhere. Julie's a shy little thing."

"Stand-offish, I'd call it. That's what you are too."

Leaning forward, Boley caught Beth's hand. He reddened angrily as she jerked it free.

"Don't you know when a man wants to marry you?" he demanded. "We'd do well together, you and me. If it's money you want, I'll be rich one of these days." He drew a long breath. "I've got Gold Camp under my thumb right now. In just a few more months—"

Beth jumped up. "No. Oh no! Please, Mr. Boley—"

"Now, wait a minute," he insisted, catching her by the waist. "The first time I saw you, sitting up on that wagon looking so pretty, I wanted you. Maybe I'm in too much of a hurry for you, Beth. But I'm a man knows his own mind. Just think about it. Give me time."

"No!" she cried, struggling away from him. "Don't you dare to touch me! Let me go!"

He released her so suddenly that, stumbling, she almost fell.

"I never asked another woman," he exclaimed, "and there's been plenty of 'em were willing." His face was scarlet with something more than anger. She saw a fury in his eyes that shocked her.

"Ain't I good enough for you?" he demanded.

"Of course I have nothing whatever against you," Beth said hurriedly. "It's only—" she hesitated, trying to soften her words—"please understand, Mr. Boley. My husband died only a few months ago. Don't ask me again. I really mean it. I know I will not change my mind."

HE STOOD still an instant, breathing hard, throttling down his resentment and humiliation. "All right. I've asked you fair and square and you say no. But," he said, staring down at her, "this is my town, Beth Evans, and you ain't going to forget it. Don't try to buy in the Gold Camp store. It's my store! I sell only to my friends."

***"Nope, I'd rather be a fireman. You cowboys don't get any pensions!"***

"You wouldn't do that," she cried. "How will I get food for the child?"

"You won't," he said flatly. He walked over to his horse, then turned to smile at her.

"Nice grass you've got here. Looks like good land for filing on. Open, too, ain't it?"

"I hear you own Gold Camp," Beth retorted. "Haven't you used your rights?"

Boley laughed. "Any man can file, you know that. A woman can't. And there ain't a soul in camp would take you in against my say-so." He swung into his saddle. "I'll give you some time to think it over. Say three weeks. Maybe you'll change your mind after all, Mrs. Evans. So long."

Beth watched him disappear over the ridge. Three weeks! She looked over the lovely meadows at the grazing animal, slick and shiny now. She could sell the oxen right away before folks heard what Nat Boley was planning to do. There was a good supply of food in the wagon. Jim's death had left her with more than the average amount.

I'll manage, she thought. I can hold out until I hear from Daniel. But the land—Tears came into her eyes as she thought of the land.

Julie came quietly beside her. The child was as light on her feet as was her father. Beth started as the small hand slipped into hers.

"He's bad, making you cry. I'll tell my daddy on him," Julie threatened. "He'll fix ole Mr. Boley."

Beth wiped her eyes hurriedly.

"Julie, when you get all fussed up, the best thing is to do something and do it right quick. Guess I'll make a couple of pies. Something special, not just dried apple."

"That's the only kind there is," asserted Julie.

Beth looked at her thoughtfully. "Honey, you've given me an idea. Maybe we'll have us a real party tonight."

THE MEN who came for milk that evening stayed later than usual. On the trail Beth had learned to make a good imitation of mince pie, using raisins and a pemmican of dried venison meat, pounded with juniper berries and fat, Indian style. She gave a piece to each man, and they clamored for more.

"This is larrupin' stuff!" exclaimed one. "It beats Boley's restaurant all hollow. Mrs. Evans, you have a pie for me tomorrow and you can name your own price."

"Make a couple for me," chimed in an-

other young man. "I'll give you two dollars a pie and be glad of the chance."

"I can make a dozen as easy as three. I'd sure like to sell some," Beth said.

"You can sell all you want," they assured her. "A fellow gets awful hungry for sweet stuff. We'll spread the word."

A movement in the shadows by the oak caught Beth's eye. Daniel stood there, watching in his quiet way. He came to the fire as Beth smiled at him. She slipped a plate with a generous helping of mince into his hands, and he nodded to her and ate silently, one arm close around Julie.

Later, when the men had gone and the child was asleep in the wagon, he reached for more coffee and pie.

"So you thought up something new," he said, grinning. "A woman like you don't need a man."

"Maybe she does, sometimes. Have you heard about Boley?"

"Heard something. He aims to run you out of town."

"Can he do it, Daniel?"

Fourreau was silent an instant, his black eyes fixed on the small stove with its dying plume of smoke going straight up into the still air.

He nodded. "Maybe. He's gotten rid of many a man he didn't want, just starving him out. Kind of a new notion to run out a woman. What did you do to him, Beth?"

"That's between him and me."

Gathering up the plates, Beth put them in a pan and covered them with boiling water. Her voice sounded tired and dull when she said, "He wants this land."

"Well," Daniel answered reasonably. "You want it too, don't you?"

Suddenly furious, she whirled to face him.

"I won't let that man run me out! You offered to fight for a place at the camp. Can't you help me now?"

He shook his head. "I've used my right and sold it. You can find another piece of land to camp on."

"No! Don't you see, wherever I went, he'd do the same thing over. Besides," she cried, stamping her foot, "this is what I want. This land! Here! What right has Boley to starve out anyone?" she demanded. "Why should the camp depend on him for food? Is there any reason why another line can't haul in supplies? Oh, if only I were a man!" Beth exclaimed furiously. "I'd show him! But a woman hasn't a chance. She can't even take up free land."

She sank down, trying to fight back tears of anger and helplessness.

DANIEL picked up a pebble and sat idly tossing it in his hand.

After a pause he said, "There was a whole slew of women filing on land when I left the Fort."

"Is that your idea of a joke?" Beth looked up, staring. "What are you talking about?"

He tossed the pebble, caught it again.

"It's true. There's a new law just put through. The Donations Claim Act." He glanced at her, an odd withdrawn expression in his face. She thought he hesitated an instant before he went on. "Seems like women can take up land. Three hundred and twenty acres of it."

The sudden delight that blazed through Beth was like nothing she had ever felt before. She jumped up, her fists clenched, half believing and yet afraid to believe.

"Daniel! I must file right away. Where do I go? What must I do?"

The dark man flipped the pebble toward the canyon. He got slowly to his feet.

"Hold on," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders. "There's something I've got to know before we talk about filing or anything else." He took a deep breath and she felt his fingers tighten.

"I love you," he blurted out. "I love you an awful lot, Bethenia. Do you reckon you'd take on a man like me for your husband?"

"But—but—" she stammered, "the land —" She stopped. "Did you say husband?"

He pulled her closer. "Just tell me, that's all." His voice was strange, muffled and fierce. "Just say it. Yes or no?"

"Daniel! Oh, yes. Of course, yes! With all my heart."

Her arms slid round his neck. They tightened as he lifted her off her feet, press-

ing her against him. Their lips met, and for a long moment they stood locked together.

Suddenly Beth freed herself. "We're crazy," she gasped. "We were talking about the land and now look—"

This time there was both laughter and triumph in his voice. "Let's get married, honey. Before we go to the land office."

Beth shook her head. "When Boley hears about this new act, the first thing he'll do is get someone to grab this land. No, Dan. There's plenty of time for a wedding."

"Well—" Daniel hesitated. "Guess I'll have to come right out with it," he said, shrugging. "Beth, that law is only for married women. You have to be a wife before you can file a claim. Shucks," he exclaimed, "the news ain't scarcely out yet, and already there's men marrying little gal children so they can get land under the Donations Act. I tell you, it's a pure scandal."

"So!" Beth said. She stood staring at him, feeling all the rush of her love turn to something frozen, a hurting coldness in her heart.

Her words came slowly, forced out by her pain. "I see. I understand, Daniel. You've used your rights. And now you'd find it mighty convenient to have a wife, wouldn't you? Well," she flashed out in a sudden burst of fury, "pick yourself a woman who's not so particular! You'll never get a claim through me."

SHE TURNED to run, but in one quick stride he caught her, clasping her waist tight as she fought to escape. "Keep still! Listen to me," he cried. "Can't you see this is something that works both ways?" He twisted her about to face him.

"Honey," he said, "you're a managing woman. I had to be sure you wouldn't take me just because of those filing rights."

Beth stopped struggling. "Don't you know I'd never do that?"

"I sure know it now," he admitted. Then he added with a grin, "But I bet I'm a handsomer man than I was two minutes ago." He opened his arms. "Want to leave me, sweetheart?"

The heady excitement came back to her again. Laughing, Beth moved closer to him.

"We'll marry right away!" she exclaimed. "We'll start hauling freight, and I'll sell pies and milk until we get going. And, Dan. Why not bring in a flock of sheep? We have pasture ready made, and there's a heap of money in meat—"

"If you don't quit your planning and kiss me right now I swear I won't marry you," Daniel threatened, bending down.

Beth brushed back the long black hair that fell over the scout's leather-clad shoulders. "You'll have this trimmed before the wedding, won't you?"

"No," Dan replied calmly. "I reckon not. I like it long. You'll have to manage with the way it is."

It was a little thing, and yet Beth felt a shock of surprise, as if she had been stopped by the solid but invisible barrier of his will. In that instant she knew that the pattern of her life was set and she was content for it to be so. She lifted her face for his kiss.

"Yes, Daniel," she murmured meekly, and let herself be gathered up and lost in his fierce and satisfying embrace.

***Read* WE BELONG TOGETHER *by Cecile Gilmore, a modern novel of love and marriage featured in the Winter issue of* EXCITING LOVE—*now on sale. 25c at all stands!***

*"I'll come ashore," he yelled wildly, "and teach you a lesson"*

# Low Tide at Dawn

*By Francis H. Ames*

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***THE MEN OF STORK ISLAND had set their plans well, and a woman was part of them—the bait***

JAN OURVAL sat at a table by the window in Dungeness Inn. Here he could view the room with one eye, while watching his vessel rocking at the pier below with the other. The *Estelle* was a sleek craft, twenty-six feet long, wide of beam, her tiny cabin snug against her deck. Dungeness Hook, reaching a long arm out into the Strait of Juan De Fucca, broke the long, greenish rollers into sullen, oily heaves in the more sheltered bay.

Dusk was coming down fast, which meant nine-thirty in these northern latitudes at this time of year. The San Juan islands were purple outlines across the Strait to the north. The air carried a mingled odor of salt, kelp and fir forest, of newly sawn logs. It was a heady night.

The bar in Dungeness Inn was crowded with sawmill hands, seamen and fisherfolk —a milling, boisterous mob, winding up for a Saturday evening, smelling of fish and tar and sawdust, perhaps, but still the elite of Dungeness town.

A black-haired waitress with green eyes came to take Jan's order. Looking at her, he had the quick thought that Cord Haworth had as fine an eye for women as he did for saw logs. Take this one away from the rotten stench of Dungeness, and she'd cause a man to think of kids and a rose-arbored cottage. Tall, slim of hip, thigh and ankle, a strong neck rising from a full bosom, she seemed faintly familiar to Jan, and he searched his memory, puzzled.

"Salmon," he told her. "Chinook—fresh caught and well done. A glass of wine. No red, mind you, but a good, black port."

There was a sullen anger in Jan. An island man could dine in style before the windows in Dungeness Inn, as Cord Haworth would see.

"The bay is restless tonight, with fog coming down," he said as she wrote down his order. "See how that vessel rolls and tosses in the swell."

She looked where he pointed, seeing Cord Haworth's forty foot cruiser anchored off from the pier.

"She tosses," she said, "but she's the best vessel in the bay."

"A vessel," he said, choosing his words carefully, "is no better than the hand that masters her—so the *Sea Gull's* a beggar, for sure."

"I go to Seattle on her tonight," she said, her lips sullen.

The Stork Island men had known of her plans for this night. Jan leaned back to run his hand in his jeans, bringing out a handful of greenbacks. "Five hundred dollars," he said, "if you ride with me tonight on the *Estelle.* I go to Stork Island."

A slow tide of color rose from her throat. "Why?" The single word rounded her lips.

"Cord Haworth," he said bluntly, "fancies you at present, I hear. He's a man that reaches out and takes what he wants. I'd like to take something from him, if even for only one night. I want to see his face when you step aboard the *Estelle,* and him primed for Seattle."

She gave him a long, slow look, and then she turned away without speaking. She'll be back, Jan thought. Five hundred dollars will buy any woman in Dungeness. It was too much to pay, but tonight the Stork Island men wanted to be sure.

Jan saw Cord Haworth coming toward him to keep their appointment. Cord was a broad-beamed man, with a thick neck, a face too thin for it, too sharply cut. Still, he was a handsome man, his eyes palely blue beneath a thatch of dark, almost curly hair. He gave Jan a thin smile, and to Jan there seemed mockery in it.

He's thinking of good saw logs, Jan mused, rolled down an incline into the sea, to be made into rafts and towed to his mill. He's thinking of fat profits, quickly made, and to hell with a naked island, with the winds howling down Georgia Straits, to chill the sheep and curdle the milk of the dairy cows. Beauty means nothing to him, unless it lays in the figure of a woman. This is his weakness, and tonight I'll bring him something of bitterness.

HAWORTH nodded curtly to Jan as he sat down taking up the menu, and the girl came to get his order. Cord looked up at her and his smile carried a hint of secret intimacy between them. It grated on Jan, and as soon as the girl had gone he brought up the business that had brought them together.

"I represent the men of Stork Island, Haworth," he said. "If you strip the timber from us, we'll be naked to the wind as jay birds."

"That's not my worry," Haworth snapped. "I buy saw logs where I can."

"But why Stork Island?" Jan's voice was sharp. "You have the whole of the Olympic Peninsula to log, right at your back. Why reach out to ruin the homes of men that you went to school with?"

Haworth's eyes glittered, and suspicion turned to certainty in Jan. It wasn't only the timber of Stork that this man wanted. It was a hatred of Stork Island men that motivated his greediness. Haworth was

looking back. And looking back himself, Jan suddenly knew who the waitress was, where he had known her before.

Jan pulled his eyes away from Haworth and glanced about the room. Here was such a tavern as only Dungeness could have. There was good food, soft lights and dancing. There were thick-built entertainers —with ham on rye and pitchers of beer— blonde, redhead and brunette, recruited from the waterfronts of Seattle and Tacoma. There was a cat-eyed bouncer, a graduate, no doubt, of many rings. There were tables by the windows, and there were tables farther back for those who wished dim light and doubtful romance.

The men of Stork Island had laid their plans well tonight, and the woman that Cord Haworth fancied was to be a part of them—the bait. Yes, Jan knew her. Little Jeanne Holman, who had toddled to school with Jan on Shaw Island, now working in Dungeness. It made his stomach crawl. It was like a thousand men shot down in some far land—headlines in the morning paper—as against some one that you have loved being killed before your eyes.

And he had loved her, on Shaw. A childhood romance, perhaps, that could be laughed away now. But did a man change so much, lose so much with the years, that there was nothing left within him of things that had touched him so strongly in youth? He wondered if she had recognized him, remembered him.

He had moved from Shaw to Stork, fifteen years back. He had been twelve and she was nine. The San Juan islands were a far flung empire, each island a world of its own. Now he searched his memory for wisps of island gossip. Her father had died, and they had left Shaw. That was all that he knew—and now she worked in Dungeness Inn!

"Quite frankly," Haworth was saying, rising from the table, "I see no reason for this meeting. Nothing that you could say would turn me from logging off Stork's timber."

Jan shrugged his shoulders, attacking his dessert.

"I didn't think that there would be," he remarked. "You have a poor appetite, Cord. Perhaps your conscience bothers you."

Jan saw Haworth's knuckles whiten where he gripped the table, and then he was striding through the crowd, his shoulders tight with anger.

Jeanne came to Jan with his bill. As she handed it to him, she said, "I get off at ten."

He got up, paused at the desk to pay for his food, and went out. He stood by the *Estelle,* waiting. The vessel's motor turned over slowly. Water chuckled in the throat of her exhaust. Impatience was riding him. She had said that she was to ride with Haworth tonight—for Seattle. Perhaps he should have waited by the Inn door.

Maybe Haworth had already the power over her to nod and to beckon. The thought made him wince. Jan knew little of women. Only that there were good and bad, and that the bad came to Dungeness. Then he saw her coming down the pier, a soft cloak wrapped around her to her trim ankles, the lights of the street at her back, rising in winking dots up the cliff to the forest.

NOW JAN was ready. He had cast off the lines, fore and aft. He held the fore hawser in his hand, ready for instant departure. The tide was at flood and the vessel high. As she drew near, Jan saw Haworth following her down the pier, saw him break into a run, shouting. She was close now.

Jan swept an arm about her waist, taking her to the deck with him in his leap. The *Estelle,* freed from the fore hawser's drag, yawed away from the dock.

"What goes on here?" Haworth's voice was shrill, high-pitched.

Shafts of light from the Inn fell on the pair as Jan helped her along the narrow catwalk between gunwale and cabin, bracing her against the vessel's roll.

"She's riding with an island man tonight, Cord," he taunted. "Stop her if you can."

He laughed as he pushed the girl into the cabin, throwing the wheel hard over, revving up the engine. The *Estelle* curved into the swells, building a bone in her teeth. White flame lanced out from Haworth's

extended hand, and glass showered from the port window.

Jan brought her down to the decking with a wide-swung arm as he rammed the throttle to full. The *Estelle* came about abruptly, burying her nose in the heavier combers of the Strait. Wisps of fog blotted out the dock, and the man on it. The lights of Dungeness were but orange lozenges in the fast thickening mist. A sheet of spray broke over the *Estelle's* bow, lashing across

***"What year firewater is this?"***

the pilot window as Jan snapped on the binnacle.

"He fired at us," she said in a small voice. "The *Sea Gull* will overhaul this tub, and haul her up."

"Perhaps," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "but he'll find his dory moved. It will take him some time to get under way. The shot was the act of a rattle-brained fool. It drives him insane to lose, to have something escape him that he has his claws on. He might have hit you. But that would have meant little to him. You're valuable to him as long as you are in his hands. In mine—"

The green light of the binnacle touched his face. She was looking at him, seeing how tall and strong he appeared to be in this tiny cabin, his sea cap touching the ceiling cleats.

He leaned over to stuff the money in the pocket of her coat. "On the barrel-head," he said. "You've earned it."

She looked up at him, cocking her head on one side as he'd seen her do so many times before when they were kids. Hatred for Dungeness and all that it stood for came to him so strongly that his eyes glowed with it. She saw the change come to him, and she shrank back, frightened.

"What do you want of me now?" she demanded. "You take me and run. You won't dare take me back. I'll lose my job. You will be afraid to face Haworth."

"You would be afraid of him, too," he told her, "if you had the sense that God intended women to have. He'll take whatever there is good in you and wring it out. Then he'll toss the remains aside."

"What are you up to? Why should you be willing to pay so much to make Haworth angry. Island men are poor."

"Because," he said, "I want him to follow me to Stork Island tonight. I don't want him to be in Seattle on Monday morning. He'll follow, for he is a man that lets no business interfere with woman business. He'll let no man sail off with a woman that he wants and has not possessed—or am I too late? If I am—" He took his hands from the wheel, spreading them wide in a gesture of futility.

Anger came to her face, and a deep hurt, and he saw it and was sorry for what he had said. Island men were apt to be too harsh in their judgment.

The *Estelle* was plunging now, fighting to veer with the wind that howled down the open Strait from Vancouver Island. He gave his attention to the wheel, and the vessel steadied under his hands. The growl of the propeller shaft quieted, and the *Estelle* buried her nose in the billows, plowing east by north for the San Juans.

AN HOUR and more passed, with Jan braced at the wheel, his mind on the girl. He looked back at the years of struggle, knowing that she had faced them

also. The way had been hard, and she lacked a man's strength.

He came back to reality with a start, reaching hastily to yank the whistle cord, sending a blast into the fog shrouded darkness. The echo came back, so close upon them that Jeanne cried out involuntarily. He shot a quick glance at her as he brought the wheel hard alee, holding it there for swinging, breathless moments. Then he eased it back.

"A woman," he said quietly, "is said to bring bad luck to a ship. We almost ran aground on the rocks of Cattle Point."

He was in the inner passage, and Cattle Point lay off his port beam too close for comfort, invisible in the gloom. He felt his way cautiously, navigating by a picture etched in his brain, feeling for the current that swept the *Estelle's* keel, as a man feels breezes on his face in the dark. He knew when the tide split came together below Goose and Deadman Islands, rocky pinnacles thrusting up in the middle channel between Lopez and San Juan, for he sensed it tugging at his rudder.

He opened the window, ramming his head into the fog, feeling relief flood over him when he saw Goose Island looming beside them. The tide was strongly at ebb now. He throttled down to hold headway against it, his head cocked with listening. A slow smile crept over his face in the binnacle's light.

There was a dull, throbbing to the south, and then the *Sea Gull's* whistle blared out, feeling for Cattle Point. He jerked his own whistle in a gesture of defiance, shoving the throttle forward on the *Estelle*.

"He'd overtake us, like you said," he told her, "if he was a real island man. As it is, I'll have to tease him through the channels like a kid in kneepants. But don't be scared for him. If you want him back he'll come running. He has no shame where women and saw logs are concerned."

The swells lessened as they moved through San Juan channel, with San Juan Island, one of the larger of the one hundred and seventy odd island chain, laying off their port bow. The fog thickened in the island's lee. The *Sea Gull* suddenly loomed up, close aft, as they drove down Upright Channel, with twenty-five fathoms beneath their keel.

The channel narrowed dangerously, with the clawing rocks of Flat Point, on Lopez, reaching for them on one side, and tiny Canoe Island close by on the other. A beam of light stabbed at them from the *Sea Gull*. Jan cursed softly beneath his breath as he threw the wheel over, crowding the *Estelle* sharply in for the shore of Canoe, and the *Gull* did not dare to follow.

As they swung around Hankin Point, on Shaw Island, the fog lifted, leaving Harney Channel a mile wide streak of blue silver, sparkling in moon glow. The *Sea Gull* burst from the fog, standing out like a white picture on azure canvas, with the high-ridged islands hemming her in. The *Gull* heeled over, building a bone in her teeth, arrowing at the *Estelle*.

JAN LOOKED at Jeanne, a wry grimace on his lips. His hands nursed the wheel lovingly. The sharp bow of the *Gull* was tossing in their wake, curving out to cut them off from flight. The *Gull* turned in, and Jan twisted the wheel to port. The *Estelle* skidded on her tail, arrowing at the *Gull's* side.

Haworth could not hold his course and avoid collision, and for a flickering moment it seemed that he was inviting it. Then he spun the *Gull* hard to port and the vessels ran side by side, the *Gull's* bow wave tossing a mountain of green water over the *Estelle's* cabin.

Jan cut his throttle and the *Estelle* dropped back, twisted through the *Gull's* propeller wash, heeling hard over with its force. And then she cruised into the enfolding arms of the fog that lay in the passage between Orcas and Shaw. Jan yanked the whistle in a blatant, triumphant blaring, inviting the larger vessel to move blindly in. But she did not come.

Minutes passed, with the *Estelle* running under full power, and then Jan tooted his whistle, pausing between each blast to listen to the echo. The ever quickening return of sound was an eerie thing.

The snouts of Orcas and Crane came

closely together here, with Pole Pass so narrow that skilled navigators felt their way through at a crawl in fog. The land masses loomed up on either side of the *Estelle,* so close beyond the gunwales that Jeanne drew herself in until she was small and huddled in the corner. But she made no protest.

The *Estelle* got another glimpse of the *Gull* as they passed Fawn Island, off Deer Harbor on Orcas, far behind them now. They lost her again in the heavier fog of North Pass, and then they swung into the mile and a half, wind-swept San Juan Channel again.

A dog chase, Jan thought, and I'll wager that Haworth is laughing now. He'll think that I have led him through the islands, trying to lose him, and he'll think I've failed. If I had beat straight up San Juan Channel, for Stork, he'd have overhauled me two hours back, and tossed the *Gull* across my bows.

Stork Island came alee now, its high backbone shrouded in fog, hiding the virgin timber that Haworth would sell the souls of its inhabitants to gain. He'd strip the island, Jan thought, and laugh, as he has laughed so many times at those weaker than himself.

He laughed once too often when he was a kid, and we ganged up on him on the way to school. He was older and stronger than the rest, but they sent him home with a black eye and a split lip, in payment for those he had so often handed out. Cord Haworth, son of the only rich man on Shaw, who had everything, yet always felt it necessary to prove that he was better than the rest.

The shore of Stork was a high, rugged wall, with the breakers creaming on the reef, two hundred yards or more out from the narrow, silver ribbon of sand that formed the beach below the cliffs. The *Estelle* was driving desperately now, with the *Gull* gaining fast. Unhampered by fog, Haworth was driving the vessel until its bow wave curved up in cascading waterfalls.

The hound comes home, Jan thought, with the wolf chasing it. And a Dungeness lady as the prize.

HALF MOON COVE suddenly lay off their lee bow, its curved crescent of white beach behind a narrow opening in the reefs. Darkness has but a brief stay in the San Juans in summer, and dawn was lightening the east now. Jan put the wheel hard over, his eyes gauging the width of the passage. Two fathoms in Half Moon Cove, shallowing up to the pier, but not one between those reaching reefs at low tide today, and the day well chosen.

Jan glanced up at the chronometer above his head. Three-twelve, and the tide at full ebb. Cord Haworth had been born on Shaw, but he had never been an island man. His heart wasn't in it.

The *Estelle* passed through, with the *Gull* hard in her wake. Jan rammed his throttle forward, turning to watch the larger vessel run aground, as he knew that she would.

The *Gull's* mast rocked crazily as the vessel drove into the sand bar that lay inside the passage. The blaring whistle shut off instantly, and a white mountain of froth sprang up beneath the *Gull's* fantail as Haworth went into full reverse.

"Ah!" Jan exhaled gustily.

Two long, low, reef fishing crafts moved out from behind the headland. They came astern the *Gull,* hauled around, nose to nose, and Haworth was blocked, bow and stern. Men swarmed over the decks of the blocking craft, dorys broke away, laying out reef nets for the run of Blueback salmon, drifting north for the Fraser river.

Jeanne stood beside Jan now, looking astern. It had all been so sudden, so well-timed, that it held her speechless. The *Estelle* was still, drifting toward the shore.

"That was a dirty trick," she said. "They'll have to let him clear when the high tide floats him off."

"Lady," Jan told her shortly, "when Stork Island men get their gear down for salmon, they'll budge for no man. Haworth is there until the time's too short for him to reach Seattle by Monday morning."

Haworth was on the deck now, shouting incoherently to the fishermen, shaking his fist.

"Let him rave," Jan said harshly. "They won't hear him."

Jan nudged the *Estelle* into the small pier, tying her alongside. Jeanne's eyes moved to the white house that stood on the knoll in the green valley, the forest black above it, alfalfa green below. Sheep grazed on the meadow. A rooster greeted the dawn. A shepherd dog loped from the house to greet them. It sniffed at Jeanne's skirts, turned to nuzzle Jan's hand.

"What about me?" she asked. "Where do I go from here?"

He looked across the water and her eyes followed his, seeing the dory being let down from the *Gull.* "You'd better go," she said. "Haworth's coming ashore, and he'll have men with him."

"He won't," Jan told her. "Haworth mans his ship alone when he plans to sail with a woman aboard. You were to go with him to Seattle, remember."

She flushed and bit her lips, watching the dory pull away from the *Gull,* come toward them with urgent, angry sweeps of the oars.

"Don't fight him, Jan," she begged, coming close to him. "He always used to beat you when we were kids."

She had known him, remembered him, as he had her. Jan stretched himself like a lazy cat.

"We're both grown men now," he said. "Cord hasn't thought of that. He'll never leave me in peace now until I show him that I'm stronger than he is."

The dory turned sideways to the shore, scant yards out. Haworth stood up. He stepped into the shallow water with an oar cocked in his hands like a club.

"You foxed me into shoal water, Ourval," he called bitterly. "I'll have you arrested."

"And tell the judge," Jan laughed at him, "that you got stuck ramming in after a man who had a date with your girl. That's all you could tell him. You'd be the laughing stock of the islands."

It was true, and Haworth knew it. His face darkened with a wrath that seemed to take him by the throat.

"I'll come ashore," he yelled wildly, "and teach you a lesson."

Eagerness came into Jan's eyes as he stepped into the water, wading out. "You won't need to come in, Cord," he said. "I'll come out and get you."

THE OAR swung up, started down, and Jan surged forward to grasp the upraised wrists. Muscles rippled along his shoulders as he brought power to bear on Haworth's arms. They strained together in a test of strength, and then Jan brought Cord's arms up and back, twisted the man over his knee, turning him end for end in the tide.

Jan wrenched the oar from Haworth's hands, flinging it wide. Haworth came up with a strangled cry, leaping for the dory. Jan churned in pursuit, up to his waist in water, but Jeanne splashed out after him.

"Enough!" she cried. "Let him go, Jan."

Haworth flailed frantically at the water with his one oar, intent on escape. He had not dared to use a gun here, with the Stork Island men behind his vessel.

"You shouldn't have done that," and sudden humor drove the anger from Jan's face. "It wasn't in your contract."

"Some of his men will come for him," she said, gazing at the *Gull.* "They'll force the Stork Island men to let him out at high tide."

"Why should they?" he said, his voice harsh. "They think in Dungeness that he sailed with you last night."

She drew her breath sharply in. "I didn't realize," she said. "I didn't know—I've only been in Dungeness a few days."

He looked at her, remembering her as she had once been, seeing the clean flush that the dawn brought to her cheeks, the way the salt air curled her hair about her face. Her eyes, he thought, are greener now, but no less clear. "Running a man's vessel aground by trickery," she said, "doesn't sound like island men."

He shuffled his feet in the sand.

"We talked it over," he said, "we Stork Island men. Haworth had plenty timber, he didn't need ours. We didn't own the high ridges, of course, and all that we asked was a fair shake to buy them. The timber land is up for auction in Seattle on Monday. We pooled our money, all of it, and we sent our man there. We know it wouldn't be

enough. Haworth would overbid us, beyond the timber's value, if need be, because he has always hated us. We pleaded with him, but pleading had no effect. Tonight we talked the only language that he understands, and we beat him at his own game."

"It still wasn't right," she persisted.

"When men fight to protect their homes," he said slowly, "they are at war. In war anything is fair, and we'd be lost without timber on the ridges."

She saw his point, but she'd never let him know it.

"You used me for bait," she accused.

Jan thrust his hands deep in his pockets, wondering how she could so easily confuse him, make him feel like a small, guilty boy. A puzzled expression came over his face. The money he had given her was in his pocket. He drew it out, held it up.

"I didn't want the money," she explained.

"You didn't want the money!" he echoed. "Then why did you come?"

"Have fifteen years so changed me!" she exclaimed. "Don't you know me, Jan?"

"They haven't changed you, Jeanne," he said, and he was grinning at her. "You don't belong in Dungeness—you never did."

What he had said was true and she knew it. It would be nice to live on an island again. They both knew that she couldn't leave Stork until the *Gull* cleared the channel, after the second high tide. Eighteen hours.

It wasn't long. Both of them found themselves wondering if it would be long enough to go back to their childhood, bringing the dreams they'd had then, back to life. And suddenly, looking at each other, they knew—both of them—that she was home.

The shepherd dog sat down before them, looking at them, and the dog was laughing. Jan put his big arms around her, and she lifted her face to him.

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## THOUSAND-DOLLAR BILLS

**THE TIGHTLY braided red pigtails bobbed as Molly Tobin turned from her old washboard to see a tall, handsome, broad-shouldered Irishman with blue eyes smiling down at her. He was Johnny Brown.**

**"It's Saturday night," he said. "Let's you and I walk down Chestnut Street."**

**By the time Johnny took Molly home that night, she had told him she would marry him. It had been only three weeks since Molly Tobin and her two young brothers had left the Missouri River bottoms for Leadville, Colorado, the wildest, roughest and happiest silver camp in the world. Molly washed the clothes of miners and scrubbed their shanties to make a living.**

**Two months after Molly married John J. Brown, he struck it rich and sold his claim for $300,000. He brought the money home in one-thousands dollar bills and told his bride to hide it well while he went out to celebrate. Coming home in the cold, icy dawn, he built a fire in the cookstove and thereby burned up the entire three hundred thousand dollars.**

**"Don't worry, honey," he said. "Before the ring of day shows in the sky tomorrow, I'll stake another mine for you."**

**He did and located the Little Johnny, the greatest producer in Colorado. They say Johnny took twenty million dollars from it.**

**He built Molly a mansion in Leadville with silver dollars embedded in the floor. But Molly knew that without an education she could not go far. So she went to Europe to study while Johnny stayed at home, comfortable in his stocking feet. With his great purse always open to her, Molly lived in Europe for years, becoming polished and beautiful.**

**She was on her way home to Colorado on the tragic Titanic when it struck its fatal iceberg. At the moment the alarm sounded she was promenading the deck in her long chinchilla cape. Straightway she forgot to be fashionable. From somewhere she produced a gun, then manned an oar in a lifeboat and swore at her companions like a pit boss. Under the prod of her tongue the men didn't dare give up rowing, but kept at it for hours until they were picked up.**

**From then on until her death, Molly was known as the Unsinkable Mrs. Brown.**

——*Edna Stewart*

# FIVE GRAND *or Else*

by AUSTIN CORCORAN and M. J. COREY

TWO SOLDIERS got off the Greyhound from the west and moved aside from the main runway filled with passengers leaving or taking the various buses. Seatmates for the past two days, they were saying good-bye when one of them, Jim Boland, first saw the girl. She came through a side entrance walking with a model's glide and clever swing of her hips. Pausing not far from the pair of soldiers, she set her wristwatch by the clock on the station wall.

"No, I'm not going to wire my folks till I see if I make my next connection," Jim was saying. "Don't want 'em to drive in to meet the wrong bus."

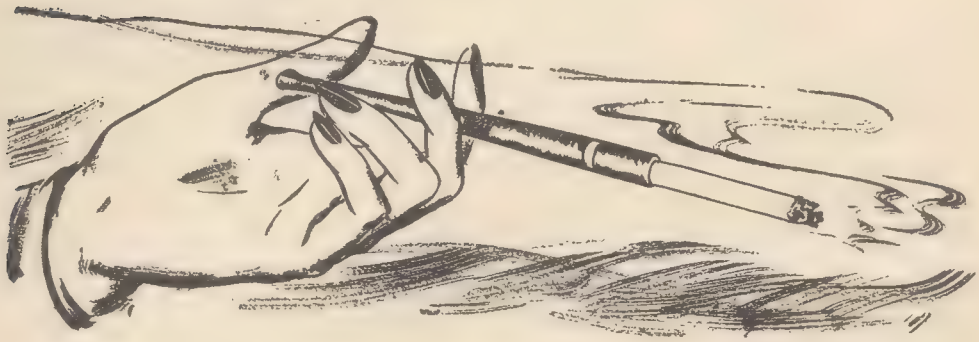
He knew the girl was sizing him up. His year of service in Korea had gotten him out of the habit of looking or being looked at by American girls, and this one was a special edition, which could account for sensations similar to the premonitory tingling of nerve ends he'd felt in dangerous moments at the war front.

When his sandy-haired companion ran for his bus and Jim turned, the girl had vanished. He was mildly surprised. This fade-out didn't conform to the interest her close scrutiny had betrayed.

A shrug of his muscular shoulders dismissed her. His experiences since landing on the West Coast had all had a flavor of unreality. Now he found it difficult to believe that within less than twenty-four hours he'd be on the old Circle B Ranch, which he had seriously doubted ever seeing again.

Lifting his kitbag, he went outside and crossed the street to the White Front Lunchroom opposite the bus station. A middle of the night dreariness hung over the thoroughfare. Not even the lighted windows of the restaurant counteracted the gloom of a huge, shabby storage building on one side, a dark stretch of open ground on the other. The sole occupant of the room was a sleepy-eyed young fellow behind the counter.

He took Jim Boland's order and was frying an egg for the sandwich when footsteps advanced from the open front doorway and a couple slid into a narrow booth against the wall on Jim's right. Jim's glance



***HE WAS TRAPPED in a speeding car with a beautiful***

***redhead who'd shoot him at the drop of an eyelash***

flicked over the man whose neutral colored, belted raincoat looked a bit incongruous above wide-legged, purple slacks and sport shoes of showy black-and-white leather. His companion was the curvy girl.

Even a man could size up her outfit as costing plenty of mazuma. It also had the alluring effect achieved not by tightness all over but in certain spots. A red gold curl had escaped from the black and orchid bandanna tied over her head. She gave Jim a quick look, then concentrated on her companion.

The sleepy-eyed attendant took their orders, left the room and could be heard stirring around in the kitchen. Jim had almost finished his pie when the man in the booth rose from his seat.

"Take your time, Vanna. I'm going to clean up a bit," he said, going towards the washroom.

The girl had reached up to lower the window beside her. The sash stuck. Turning, she smiled at Jim, a lifted eyebrow asking him as plainly as words to help her.

"Please," she said in a throaty, impelling voice as he approached. Her smile was the flattering "I think you're awfully nice" type.

Jim set a knee on the opposite seat and grasped the window frame firmly. As he leaned forward, something cracked down on his head. He tried to turn, to hold on to his senses, then a second crack sent him down into a whirlpool of darkness. This was partly broken once by pain, again by sensations of being rolled and tumbled about. Then blackness erased all feeling, all awareness.

WITH RETURNING sensibility came belief that he was coming out of a nightmare, like some that had assailed him in Korea. Only he didn't rouse with any speed. His throat was as scratchy as straw, his tongue felt a couple of sizes too large and an attempt to gulp in a deep breath was blocked by his stiff jaw. Stretching his arms, legs or body was also impossible.

He felt as if he'd crowded his five feet eleven of length into a kid's short bed. When he got his eyes open, he could see nothing. Yet it felt as if the bed was traveling at a fast pace and sidewise.

Paralyzed arms and legs! A frozen jaw! Fear took over. While Jim struggled briefly with that, the sudden shining of a light down on his face brought increased bewilderment.

Looking up, the ceiling seemed much too close. Glancing down over his body he saw he was half covered with some colorless stuff. Below stiff folds of that were his legs in purple slacks and feet that reminded him of somebody, feet in flashy black-and-white shoes that couldn't possibly belong to him. This wasn't a nightmare. He must be delirious.

Pain shot through the legs he'd tried vainly to stretch, rousing him to keener awareness. He was in the back seat of a car, bunched partly on one side, knees bent, feet partly off the seat. His ankles were bound together. His wrists were tied behind him, the rope rasping his bare flesh. Something was tied securely over his mouth. He could make merely a growling sound in his dry throat.

A tremendous effort to wriggle into a sitting position loosened the raincoat that had laid over his upper body. It slid to the floor revealing further unfamiliar clothing, a cream-colored silk sport shirt and a belt of alligator skin with a heavy gold buckle.

As if his movements were a signal, the car was slowed to a stop. Brilliant violet eyes met his gaze across the back of the driver's seat.

"So you're awake," a throaty voice said. "I'll make you more comfortable in a minute."

With that, the eyes vanished and the car started.

The girl! Instantly, with the sound of her voice, Jim was wide awake. Incidents fitted together to form an incredible pattern. This girl her companion had called "Vanna" had conspired with him to knock Jim out and kidnap him.

While he was trying to figure why, the car turned from the highway into a winding, dirt road. Soon they were running between brushy growth that scraped the automobile top and slapped at the windows. With a

final twist and snapping of twigs they came to a stop.

Vanna got out, opened a rear door and got in beside Jim.

"Now we'll talk," she said. "First I'll take off your muzzle if you agree not to yell for help. Nobody'd hear you but I can't waste the time. Okay?"

Jim managed a stiff nod.

SHE TALKED while she untied the knots holding his gag in place. Her terse sentences made each point clear while her manner put over that here would be no modifying of the terms.

"You've got no reason to gripe," she said. "Wolf knows how to put a guy to sleep without doing him any damage. Your head isn't busted. And you should thank us for giving you a chance to make a good stake. If you agree to play your hand as I deal it now, in three days I'll give you five grand."

BONNIE RYAN

"If not?" Jim croaked.

She shrugged. "Anything could happen." Taking a thermos bottle from the front seat she opened it, poured water in the cup top and held it to his dry, swollen lips. She was silent while he drank.

As she knelt on the car floor so close to him, he got the scent of expensive perfume from her hair and clothing. The touch of her fingers against his face had been like silk velvet brushing over his skin. In ugly contrast was the butt of a gun protruding above the belt that circled her round, slender waist. Underneath the sparkling of her eyes he sensed ice and flame. She could be as warm as a tropic day, as hard and cold as an Arctic night.

"Deal the cards," he said hoarsely when he had swallowed two cups of the cool liquid. "Let's see the layout."

"Know who Wolf Nicola is?"

The name had been making headlines for several days.

"Ye-ah. He shot and killed Big Joe Spivak, a rival racketeer at a Chicago night club the other day. One of his shots got a bystander. Some of Nicola's boys cut in and after a big free-for-all, he got away."

"Right," Vanna said, her chin lifting with pride. "And *I* got him out of Chicago and across country to where we picked you up. We made one car change, this sedan with Nebraska plates. I don't think the cops are onto that yet. But we're sure Spivak's boys are. His side kick Gumbo is hot on the trail. The Mink's with him and he's sharper than a bloodhound. They're out to get Wolf, wipe him out right now! The cops don't count so much, Wolf's got the smartest lawyer in the United States and could probably beat even the double murder rap. But he's got to dodge the Spivak gang."

"So he stole my uniform and papers. Then why didn't he just kill me and get rid of the body?" Jim asked.

"Because you've got to be Wolf Nicola for the next three days, till he can get clear out of the country."

"Huh?" Jim grunted. "So they can get me! It's no deal, I'm throwing your cards back."

Vanna's eyes went ice hard. Their sparkles were the sharp glitter of dagger points.

"Play your hand and get the jackpot," she said. "It's the five grand or else. Well —if you cooperate, we can outfox them. If I have to carry your dead weight, I'll

probably have to let them get you, some time when it'll be shoot and pull out without waiting for close identification. You might even be buried as Wolf Nicola. Who would be better able to identify him than Vanna, his girl? You're the same height and build, same hair and eye color and it's a neat job I think I could put over."

The brilliant eyes held his gaze while she laughed with grim amusement. Icy shivers went through Jim's muscular body.

"What's the word?" she demanded.

"Give me a little more time," he hedged.

Vanna hesitated, scowling. Then she said, "Okay. One hour. Because I believe you'll agree when you think it over. It'll make it easier for me and safer for Wolf."

"I'll agree not to raise an alarm," he offered. "But I want to sit up."

She nodded and helped him change positions. Then she got quickly back into the driver's seat. Ten minutes later they were speeding over the paved highway.

JIM DIDN'T kid himself that he wasn't in a tough spot. Nicola's girl meant exactly what she said. He had no intention of taking up her offer. Even if he could bring himself to throw in with them, he doubted that that would insure his safety. He was pinning his hope on the slender chance that he might free his hands. He'd already worked a little slack in the cotton rope binding them.

The dome light was off and the speed she was holding gave Vanna scant chance to watch him. He'd trick her into stopping again and, girl or no girl, knock her out, take her gun and make a quick getaway. At the first sheriff's or police office he could locate, he'd spill his story and start spreading the alarm for the racketeer killer passing himself off as Sergeant Jim Boland of the U.S. Infantry.

Suppose he didn't break away before the hour's end. Vanna couldn't keep driving around the country with him a prisoner in the car for three days. She'd have to hole up some place where he could be locked in. The follow-up to that thought had a chilling effect. She wouldn't. Vanna would throw him to Wolf's enemies and finagle it so they believed they had killed the right man.

When the clock of the dash registered the passage of a quarter hour, his left hand was part way through the twists of the rope. At the same instant Vanna exclaimed, "Car following us. I'm doing all I can and it's coming up. I think it's Gumbo."

Jim could see headlights reflected in the mirror. They were coming up steadily.

It seemed too fantastic to be true. Like a crazy movie translated into actual life. But there was nothing fantastic about the lead slug that bored through the rear window and passed Jim's head with no more than an inch margin.

He slid to the floor between the two seats, lowering his head to his knees. At the same instant Vanna crouched over the steering wheel. But the car tore on as more bullets followed, spatting viciously against the metal of the car body and perforating the window a second and third time.

The fleeing sedan swerved left, then right and there was a halt in the gunfire.

"You all right?" Vanna's voice was taut. "Good. I got in front of two Diesel trucks. There's several cars coming this way. Before they can get us in line again I'll try to get into cover and let them pass. But keep down."

Jim was silent, working frantically to get his left hand free.

They hit a series of curves and Vanna took the first with a speed that nearly threw them from the road. That slowed her a bit. But the two big trucks looming behind gave an effect of protection. Jim wondered if their pursuers would try to pass and fire as they went. Nothing seemed too incredible in his present mood.

A final wriggle and pull freed his one hand. The loosened rope dropped easily over the other. Exultation drove away the chill that had been chasing up and down his spinal column. He leaned forward as if to peer through the windshield.

A bit of Vanna's face was visible in the mirror. Her bright red lips were a taut line. A tough babe. Used to tight spots and living at hair trigger tension. She'd shoot him without hesitation if she believed he was getting away. And make use of his

dead body to further aid Nicola's escape. At a guess, that crook had headed for Old Mexico with South America as his final goal.

These thoughts raced through his head as he cautiously tried to move his right arm and get that hand down to work on the bonds holding his ankles. His shoulder joint seemed to have crystalized and even the attempt to change position of that arm brought sharp pains shooting through the numbness of nerves and sluggishness of muscles long cramped.

They swept around another curve and he saw lights some distance ahead. Not a town. A bunch of car lights, some motionless, others swinging this way or that. Must have been an accident. Maybe a road block.

His pulse stepped up. Right there might come his chance to make a getaway. Equally, it might give the murder minded occupants of the pursuing car opportunity to carry out their purpose. No use planning. He'd probably have about one split second to grab whatever chance for escape there would be.

Distance between them and the lights lessened fast, though Vanna was slowing. Now he could see a red light nearer than the others.

"If we're stopped there," she said, her husky voice harsh, "and you make a peep, one way or another, you'll be a dead bird. Get that?"

"I getcha." His voice was steady, without expression.

She'd keep on, play for more time to hold pursuit away from Nicola. If she couldn't do it that way, she'd gain what she could from Boland's killing and delay through an investigation.

THEY WERE slowing more. The picture cleared fast. Beyond the warning red lantern was a jumble of cars and trucks, of people moving between them. Men shouting and calves bawling made a confused medley of sounds.

The man holding the lantern motioned Vanna to stop.

"What's the matter up ahead?" she asked.

"Two big trucks crashed at the bridge," he said, "and a station wagon coming from the other way rammed into the mess. May take half an hour to clear the way for traffic. Wrecker ain't here yet. . . . No, can't cross the wash, it's too deep. There ain't any way to detour, just have to wait. You can get off the road on that side, like them other cars and trucks have, if you wantta."

Jim sized up the situation while Vanna questioned and the guard answered. He couldn't see around the two Diesels which had halted close behind them. But he guessed their pursuers wouldn't be far in the rear. The road block might play into their hands. In any event, the next half hour called for sharp wits.

He could distinguish several long trucks standing on the open ground off the road, with them a conglomeration of cars. One of the trucks held the bawling calves and he believed all were filled with stock. A small truck loaded with baled hay and pulling a horse trailer passed through a belt of light. Quite a mess of vehicles and it looked like a good spot to make his break.

He was still working to free his ankles when Vanna turned from the road. As they eased over the shoulder, a long-nosed black car came smoothly alongside, so close that Jim could have reached a hand from the window beside him through the window of the other automobile.

In the few seconds they rolled along side by side, the flaring headlights of one of the trucks swung their way, flooding them with radiance. As if they were spotlighted, he saw the three men in the other car.

A heavy, flat-faced man in the rear seat, a thin, black-haired driver and beside him a boyish-faced fellow with almost white hair and eyes as pale and bright as glass. He was staring straight at Jim. During the past months Jim had looked often at the threatening face of death. But never closer, never grimmer, never with so personal a menace as now.

Then the long black car gathered speed and rolled on toward the farther edge of the parked vehicles.

"There they go!" Vanna exclaimed. "The Mink was driving. I don't know the bird

with him, but he must be the new gun Gumbo just brought east from L. A. Heard he was an albino. Gumbo was in the back seat, giving me an ape grin."

She talked while she was cleverly maneuvering to a spot closely surrounded by other cars.

"Why didn't he shoot?" Jim asked.

"Too much in the spotlight with those three men in the truck cab staring straight at us. They figure they've got Wolf sewed up." She paused significantly. When she spoke again her voice had warmed and softened. "We can beat 'em yet. Will you—Jim?"

"What for? In order to help a murderer go free?"

"No, for the five thousand, you dope," she retorted without losing the honey from her voice. "Didn't you ever take a chance? Ever play a game just for the sport of playing it? You hate to go against the law, but you wouldn't be blocking it, you'd just be blocking a bunch of killers. I'm a good pal, we'll have fun beating them. Say yes and we'll be out of here and back-tracking ourselves while they think they're closing in."

***Before he realized her intention, she had the loop whirling above her head***

One of her velvet soft hands brushed Jim's cheek. "Please!"

HE SAT up straight, his eyes fixed steadily on the white blur of her face in the now shadowed interior of the car. "The answer is no!" he said.

"You damn fool!" she flung at him. "You can't get away. Haven't you got the

sense to see you're done for? Wolf's got to have at least one more day. A report that he's been killed will give him that, maybe more. He's going to have it! If they don't get you pretty damn quick, I will!"

Her hand dropped. To the gun in her belt, he guessed. Jim's right fist darted out and Vanna toppled limply from the seat.

At the moment he didn't care if he'd cracked her head. Sitting there calmly talking about his murder. Hell! He'd believed he'd been broken in to shocks, that nothing would ever really get him again. But this girl with the honey voice and velvet hands had the world beat for dealing out cold shivers.

She'd slid to the floor out of his reach. Stepping over into the front seat, he crouched and reached down. The gun must have slid from her belt. He couldn't find it under her. Voices approached, halted nearby to discuss the accident. What if somebody looked inside the car and saw Vanna on the floor, passed out completely and with a bruise on her head? He'd better not be there then. Forget the gun and get out.

He was on the ground and had the car door closed so quietly no attention was drawn from the group standing nearby. He decided to work his way to the road and cross that. He had an impression the country was rougher over there. He'd get down into a wash, maybe the big one the bridge crossed. It would mean crossing the lighted zone, but that seemed a lesser risk than sheltering among cars which would break up their close formation and start moving the minute the way was open.

Once away from Vanna and the sedan with Nebraska license plates, he had only to fear the albino. He alone of the three would identify Jim as Nicola. He'd had a perfect view of him inside the car, and the bright, glassy eyes would instantly recognize him.

His legs still felt stiff and his feet awkward in the sport shoes that were at least a size too big. Not good for running, but he'd take it easy and make his head save his heels.

He was in the act of turning to go around the rear of the car next to Vanna's when the long, black automobile nosed into view and halted some twenty feet from the front of the sedan. There it was swung around with a quick dexterity so it stood facing his way.

Jim dropped in the split second before the headlights hit the spot where he was standing. Crouching close to the ground, he worked backward to a shadowed place alongside a coupe. Roused by his movement, a dog inside started yapping shrilly.

He ducked again for the nearest dark spot. That sort of dodging wouldn't get him anywhere. Somebody'd spy him and think

he was sneaking around to steal something. The idea was to stand up and walk like any man with a clear conscience. Away from the road, too, for the albino had a regular panorama view of the open stretch alongside.

He squinted at the eastern sky. Daylight couldn't be far off. Best idea would be to hit for a gulley and hole up till the bridge was clear and all the cars pulled out. Those pavement gangsters wouldn't try to comb the country. If they discovered their quarry wasn't in the sedan, they'd figure he'd be close to it. At least Jim imagined they would. Everything was so upside down and incredible he felt unable to think out anything logically.

VOICES and raucous laughter burst out on his right. They mixed with frightened, angry snorting of a horse and a tattoo of kicking heels. He turned. The continued laughter and furious snorts came from a trailer towards which he went with running strides.

"Hey! Get away from there!" he ordered the pair who obviously were tormenting the horse confined in the trailer. The terrified animal was fighting frantically to free himself.

"G'wan! D-don't s-spoil fun!" one of the pair stammered drunkenly.

"Get out!" Jim growled, coming closer.

"Oh! Y-you wanna f-fight!" the second man stuttered, lifting a fist.

Jim made a lunge, grabbed each man by his collar and whacked their heads together. When he released them, one sprawled on the ground, cursing and whimpering. The other made a staggering effort to put up a fist battle. A sharp cuff on his face from Jim changed his mind.

As he stumbled back, Jim yanked the sprawling drunk to his feet, faced him away from the trailer and gave him a sharp kick on the rear. The two lurched off, mumbling and cursing.

The horse was still stomping and twisting, blowing gustily through twitching nostrils.

"Whoa, fella, easy there," Jim said, his low voice soothing and commanding. "Tha-a-at's right," he drawled, stepping closer and continuing to talk in a quiet monotone.

The head was visible through an opening in the trailer side and he could see it was a light-colored horse—a bundle of twitching nerves now. Still talking, Jim stood close to the trailer, one hand resting gently on the horse's neck when light, running steps came towards him.

"What's the matter? What happened to Circus?"

The girl who halted beside him wasn't much over five feet tall, maybe three inches. She was slender and round, hatless, her hair showing very black even in the gloom. There was alarm in her voice which had the clearness of a child's.

"Some drunks were teasing him," Jim answered, "I chased 'em off."

"Thank you," she said with an appreciation that gave him a good feeling. Springing lightly up on the coupling bar, she crooned, "Circus, there, there, honey nobody's going to hurt you!"

The horse blew softly as he stretched his nose towards her outstretched palm.

"I never thought of anybody bothering him when I followed Dad and Dan over to the bridge. They're helping clear the road," she explained.

Jim's hand still rested on Circus' neck.

"Circus is as gentle as a kitten but nervy and he doesn't like strangers," the girl went on. "You must be a wizard with horses."

"They mostly like me," he admitted modestly. "I was raised on a ranch. Breaking and handling horses was always my job.

"Maybe you're on the way to the rodeo in Canyon, too?"

"No. Just traveling through—on my way home. I've been overseas, in Korea."

Jim wasn't inclined to talkativeness about himself. But the sudden letting down of tension, the quiet, evident interest of the girl made him want to talk to her—more than ever, when a car turned, throwing light over them for a moment and he saw her face. Eyes so clearly, deeply blue that they were astonishing between their jetty lashes. A generous mouth with soft, sweet lips.

"Oh!" she murmured. It was almost a sigh. "My oldest brother's over there—and my other brother Dan's in the draft. That's the main reason we're doing two or three of the rodeos, a farewell good time together."

She seemed as glad as he to talk, and went on as naturally as if they had long been friends. "Dad's Charley Ryan and I'm Bonnie, the only girl in our bunch. We've got a ranch over in the San Luis Valley. Just did a show up in Osseo and are on our way to the Royal Gorge show in Canyon. Dan will rope calves and ride Brahmas, I'll trick ride. After the All Girl Rodeo in the Springs next week, we'll go home."

"My name's Jim Boland," he said. "Dad's dead, but Mom and my older brother run our outfit down in New Mexico. The Circle B, near Magdalena."

NEITHER had noticed the three men who came between the parked cars and halted not far away. Nor did they notice the pair at the trailer front which now was in shadow. Words in a youthful, flattered male voice hit Jim with a sharp impact.

"You just bet I'll help you any way I can," the voice declared emphatically. "Every law officer in the United States has been alerted to watch for Wolf Nicola. I had no idea he's been traced so close here and I'm sure glad to meet you two special officers from Chicago."

"We were close to grabbing him not far back, where he and his girl friend ate in an all night lunchroom. He's wise that we're right on his tail. He wrecked the window screen to get out that way instead of using the front entrance," a smooth, calm voice replied to the young state patrolman. "We're practically sure they didn't get past this road block. The girl friend's a redhead. You've seen his pictures—tall, dark guy. He's wearing a white shirt, purple pants and fancy shoes."

Jim's fingers pressed the trailer side until they were numb. He'd have to keep out of the way of the state officer now, couldn't get help there. And before Jim could clear himself, Gumbo's outfit would have him in their power.

"We want to surprise him and take him quietly, if we can," a thin, reedy voice chipped in. From the accompanying gesture made by the smallest of the men, the albino, Jim guessed it was he who was speaking. "But our orders are to get Nicola, whatever!"

"Sure, sure," the patrolman agreed hastily, "I know you can be trusted to handle it the best way. I'll back any move you make. But I hope you don't have to shoot him, that's a bird had ought to burn."

"If you hear shots, you'll know he forced the gunplay."

"I've got to get back to the road," the patrolman said.

"We've got another man," the calm voice replied, "We'll manage the search. As soon's these people know who's wanted, and we describe Nicola, nobody'll help him hide."

Jim could feel the tension that held Bonnie as she stood motionless as a statue on the coupling bar. He could see the glow in her eyes as she gazed steadily at him.

"Yes," he told her quietly. "It's me they're after here. But they're not officers, they're rival gangsters trailing Nicola to kill him. And I really am Jim Boland."

Bonnie drew a long, sighing breath but she was silent.

"They knocked me out in that lunchroom while the counter man was in the kitchen," he went on. "Probably put me through the window and jumped after. They switched clothes and he's got my uniform and papers, trying to get out of the country with 'em. The girl brought me along in the car, gagged and tied, as bait for these gangsters, playing for time to put him out of danger. These birds intend to kill him, and in this outfit, any of 'em could mistake me for Nicola. They'll shoot on sight, too."

The patrolman had started towards the road and the other two men were separating. "No time to explain more," Jim whispered, starting to ease back around the trailer.

Bonnie grabbed his arm. "What're you going to do?"

"Get to the nearest town and give myself up to the sheriff, or police. They'll have to investigate my story."

"You must do that just as quick as you can," she said excitedly. "If you try to hide out around here and hitch a ride to town later, that crook will have more time to get away. You can hide in the trailer. There's a bunk beside Circus. Dan sleeps in it nights when we travel, or at shows. Circus likes you, it'll work all right."

"But—" Jim started to protest.

"Come on!" she had jumped to the ground and was pulling him around to the end gate. "Quiet!" she warned. "The light-haired man is going to search around the outside of the crowd. He'll be over this way in a minute."

The gate opened. "Let Circus hear your voice while you're getting in," Bonnie said under her breath. "There's a tarp and some blankets and stuff in the bunk. Wriggle in and cover yourself as much as you can."

WHEN JIM edged in beside the horse, Bonnie went back to the trailer front. Her stillness warned of danger and he crawled quietly up on the shelf-like bed, drawing blankets and tarp around and over him, but careful to leave an ear uncovered and tilted to catch all possible outside sounds.

Bonnie's words to her horse told him somebody was approaching but there were no audible footsteps.

"Hi, miss! Have you seen a man around here in the last fifteen minutes; tall fellow wearing a white shirt?" the thin, knife-edged voice asked.

"No sir," Bonnie replied promptly, turning her head to say in a soft, low tone, "Quiet boy, take it easy."

"Who's in there?" the question was snapped suspiciously.

"My trick horse, Circus."

"You talked to somebody in there." The voice was sharper and had come close. "Who, answer me!"

"I spoke to Circus to quiet him." Bonnie's voice was even, with an honest, youthful ring. "He's nervous, doesn't like strangers and strange, loud voices. Please don't come so near him."

As the beam of a flashlight darted through the side opening of the trailer, Jim slyly gave the horse a jab in the flank. He jumped as if a snake had bitten him, shod hoofs clashing against the floor boards while he snorted and reared as high as he could in the small space.

"Get back, back!" Bonnie cried. "I told you to keep away."

"My God! Nobody'd get in with a dangerous beast like that! He ought to be shot!"

"He's gentle as a kitten," Bonnie declared emphatically. "You don't know anything about horses. You must be a city man."

"I am. I'm a member of the Chicago

Police Force, and I'm after a dangerous criminal who's hiding some place in this bunch of cars and trucks. He's Wolf Nicola, a murderer. Anybody who helps him can be arrested."

"Wolf Nicola!" Bonnie repeated breathlessly. "Why, I've heard awful things about him, read them in the papers. Did you see him here?"

"A few minutes ago. He was in the car with his girl friend, but he ducked out."

Bonnie's "Oh, my!" was so natural that Jim wanted to clap his hands.

"If you get a glimpse of any man who looks the least like Nicola, you scream as loud as you can, girlie."

"I will," Bonnie promised.

So they had found Vanna and without doubt she had made them surer even than they were before, that Wolf had been the recent occupant of the back seat.

IT WAS some minutes before Bonnie said softly, "Jim! He's gone. And I think the road's almost cleared for traffic. When Dad and Danny come, you keep still. It'll take time to explain you to Dad. If I try here, everyone will know about it and—somebody might get hurt. We'll roll right along into Canyon, to the grounds. While they get Circus into a stall and fed, I'll make coffee and fry bacon and eggs from the grub box. I'll explain about you while Dad's eating, then we'll run you in town to the sheriff's office."

It sounded smooth and easy as she lined it out.

"You put a lot of faith in a stranger, a suspicious character, too," Jim told her.

"Not too much," she replied. "Those clothes don't fit too good. The shirt collar's loose, Nicola's pictures showed *he* had a big neck. You've got a real, outdoors tan and a soldier haircut. And you know horses. No Chicago racketeer would be at home with Circus like you are." She laughed, a delighted little sound. "You should have seen how scared that glassy-eyed, fake cop was when you spooked Circus and he started jumping and rearing."

"Thanks, Bonnie, for everything," Jim said seriously. "I feel darn small, sneaking and hiding—"

"If you think it would be brave and sensible to put yourself in the way of being killed by that bunch of crooks, you need a brain test. Now, quiet until I give you the word to show up."

No sound warned them when a shadowy figure stole in close to the far side of the trailer from the open ground beyond. Now it slipped away as silently as it had come.

Bonnie went to sit on the car running board. Jim got partly under the tarp and piled blankets, pillows and a couple of bundles in such manner that he doubted if a glance inside the trailer would show that the bunk had an occupant.

Daylight increased steadily. Sounds

[*Turn page*]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stepped up. Cars were starting and the calves broke into a renewed clamor. Then firm steps approached the trailer.

"Hi, Bonnie girl. We'll be on our way in five minutes or so. Let the main-pack move first. We got along fast after the wrecker came."

That would be Charley Ryan, Bonnie's father, Jim concluded. Then another voice exclaimed excitedly, "Listen to the news, Sis! That big-shot racketeer who killed his rival and another guy at a Chicago night club was right here tonight! Three officers from Chicago searched the crowd for him."

"Are they sure it was him?" Bonnie asked.

"Sure? Of course!" the older man declared. "They found his girl, a redhead with the eye of an African lioness. Didn't have anything to hold her on, and they let her go. I hope they get him, the murdering devil!"

"Dad! Don't be so fierce," Bonnie protested. "They might get the wrong man. Or those fellows who said they were officers might be phony."

"Dammit, girl, are ye crazy?" her father spluttered. "Never have my ears heard such nonsense. They showed their cards and shields to several of the fellows. Them kind don't make mistakes when they go out after a crook."

"I hope they've gone on," Bonnie said, "and there won't be any fuss here. Let's not hang around any longer."

"We're letting the crowd and them big rodeo stock trucks pull out ahead of us," Charley Ryan said flatly. "And I'm ashamed of you, Bonnie girl, taking up for murderers and crooks. What'd your mother say? You'd ought to be tickled to know a feller like that's going to be caught. Wish't I had a chance to turn him in! This Nicola was into all sorts of skulduggery, a big dope handler; but they couldn't nail him just right for that. The devil knows how many other fellers he's killed besides them two in Chicago t'other night. Now get into that car and settle down. Don't let me hear any more of that fool talk!"

Jim thought that Bonnie's statement that it would take time to explain the situation to her father had been quite an understatement. Ryan had a single track mind. Gumbo's pals had sold him the idea that they were officers trailing a dangerous criminal. The present moment was no time to try to change Ryan's opinion.

APPARENTLY the Ryans must have gotten into the car that pulled the trailer, for Jim heard no more of their talk. Perhaps ten minutes passed before they started moving. Rolling slowly over the uneven ground, they halted at the road's edge.

Jim had his eyes close to a crack between the matched boards of the trailer side behind the bunk. Two flares showed up the scene and gave a faintly reddish cast to the features of three men who stared at the car's occupants. The largest of the trio, a flat-faced, bulging eyed fellow with a heavy jaw, he took to be Gumbo. He spoke, and again Jim heard the smooth, calm voice.

"Let's see," he said. "You two helped clear the bridge. A girl—and some suitcases in your car. Let's take a look in the trunk." Metal clinked as Ryan handed out the keys. After a short wait, Gumbo said, "Nothing but a box and a camp stove. Now, what's in that trailer?"

Jim's scalp set up an electric prickling. He knew how cheerfully, eagerly, Bonnie's father would hand him over to the phony officers.

"Only my trick horse, Circus," Bonnie chipped in.

"He's a helluva dangerous beast," the white-headed man warned.

"I'd like to make sure nobody's stowed away in that extra space," Gumbo said.

"Sure, sure," Ryan agreed readily. "But lemme tell you, Mister Officer, it'd take a feller that's plenty wise to horseflesh to load in with that horse. No city guy'd have the savvy, no sir! Circus'd raise particular hell!"

"He's right," the albino declared. "I just stepped up close to look at him and the damn beast nearly kicked that contraption to pieces."

"All right. Go ahead," Gumbo told the Ryans.

Jim relaxed with a sigh. Until they reached the rodeo grounds, he could take it easy. Gumbo would probably turn his attention to watching Vanna. But thank God, she was out of the picture. She'd done her worst. There would be nothing to draw interest to the show bunch. Thanks to Bonnie and her horse, it looked as if Jim was about in the clear. He had no doubts of the result when he could talk seriously with an officer of the law. The plot for Wolf's escape, made so hastily and in desperation, was too thin to hold up after it reached official ears.

If they saw him in daylight, neither Gumbo nor the Mink would mistake him for Wolf Nicola, whom they knew. And there was small risk of the albino being a further menace.

THE RYAN CAR and trailer went through the town and up a long hill on the south side to the show grounds. Increasing easiness of mind had lulled Jim into a doze that lasted until Bonnie's voice roused him.

"You fellas get me the grub box and stove," she said. "I'll let Circus out and you can look after him while I fix breakfast."

"Hi-ya, Pretty Boy!" she greeted the buckskin affectionately. "Tha-a-at's right, out you come." Holding fast to his bridle, she stepped into the trailer. "Stay there!" she whispered hastily. "Till I get the Ryan men fed and give Dad the inside dope."

Peeping out cautiously, Jim watched the trick horse being led away by a middle-aged man with a straight flat back and the easy moving body of a seasoned rider. With him was a slender young fellow whose bare head was thickly capped with jet hair to match Bonnie's.

Jim could hear a light clattering of cooking ware and metal dishes and presently smelled boiling coffee. A moment later he heard Dan Ryan say, "Hold it a few minutes, Sis. Holbrook's having trouble unloading his race horses, wants Dad and I to give him a hand."

"That was a break!" Bonnie exclaimed, stepping into the trailer and displaying a big mug full of steaming coffee with a plate of ham and eggs and a bun. "Get outside of this, then I think you'd better move into the end stall down there." She indicated the left hand row show ground buildings that were divided from a similar line by an open stretch about a hundred feet in width. "Some baled hay is stored there. If anybody notices you, they'll think you're just one of the boys who camped in the stall for the night. If you're spotted in here, before Dad's wise—" she paused, a rueful smile tugging at her mouth corners.

"I get it." Jim grinned cheerfully at her. "I heard your father when you tried to change his mind for him."

"It'll be all right," she assured him confidently.

It was little more than five o'clock when Jim drained the final drops of coffee from the mug and turned over the dishes to Bonnie.

"Sure is a swell morning!" he exclaimed, sweeping an appreciative glance over the panorama. "And Operation Jim Boland—Wolf Nicola is about to be brought to a successful conclusion." His gaze had returned to rest on Bonnie's face.

"When it is," he added seriously, "Jim Boland's going to start another, which he hopes won't be a fight. I think a surrender of the second party after suitable consideration of the situation would be the proper wind-up for that."

Bonnie returned his gaze, warm color rising in her cheeks. "It does have rather a nice sound," she admitted, "but there should be a—a reasonable parley, I think."

With a quick nod and a final glance that deepened Bonnie's color still more, Jim swung on a heel and went off along the line of stalls.

The long stock trucks of the Rodeo Supply Company had been unloaded in the arena corrals, and the shouts of their handlers had quieted. There was a little stirring around the half dozen house trailers parked on the open ground behind the grandstand and bleachers.

But the show grounds weren't fully awake when two Ryans seated themselves on the running board of their car, plates balanced

on their knees. Their view was across the road entering the grounds and on across the tree-shaded valley to the rugged mountain line at the north. The men were settling a question concerned with the show and Bonnie betrayed some impatience. Her restless gaze constantly shifted, always going back to the end stall on the south line.

WHEN Bonnie moved to refill her father's coffee mug, her glance was caught by a smallish man who walked slowly around the curve of the road from the hill top. Not that he was a noticeable figure. His shoulders were narrow under a brown and tan checked sports jacket. The bottoms of his brown slacks and his brown shoes were dust smeared. His straw hat, which Bonnie regarded as farmerish, was pulled low over his eyes, and the wide, drooping brim concealed most of his head.

Some guy hanging around the shows, she thought indifferently as he went on. Maybe he'd try to bum breakfast from the trailer bunch.

The argument had slowed and she turned to her father. "Dad, I've got to talk to you!" she exclaimed.

"Well talk, girl, you've got a tongue," he retorted, with a grin that gave way to seriousness as he glimpsed her expression.

"Don't break in till I'm through, and you keep out of it, Dan," she said, eying them with gravity. "Promise, Dad?"

He nodded.

"The man those phony Chicago cops were chasing last night was not Wolf Nicola, but they thought he was. He—"

"Bonnie! I don't want to hear any more of that!" Ryan exploded.

"You promised!" she flared back, then plunged into a crisp account of Jim Boland's story, concluding with his coming to the trailer and later events.

As she halted, Ryan exclaimed angrily, "You're telling me that you had the guy hid out in our trailer and hoodwinked me into breaking the law and protecting him? 'Tis damnable, no less!"

"That bird sure sold you a fine package!" Dan broke in.

"Be still, both of you!" Bonnie ordered, cheeks aflame and fire in her blue eyes. "Use your sense! With my own ears I heard you, Charley Ryan, tell those men that no city guy would have the savvy to handle Circus and get inside that trailer with him. You know a city-raised, dope-dealing tough guy that's hardly been off the pavement wouldn't know any more about horses than that slick, white-haired fake that was scared till his slats rattled, when Circus just chounced around a little in the trailer!"

"We-ell," Ryan began hesitantly. "Ordinarily you're a fairly smart girl, and there's basic common sense in that argument. But the rest of it sounds like a wild tale thought up by a liar."

"But you'll let Jim Boland talk to you, Dad?" she said, a crooning, coaxing note in her voice.

"Sure," he agreed, "after I 'tend to a bit of my own business with the feller that looks after these grounds."

"Hurry!" Bonnie called after him. "Jim Boland ought to get to the sheriff's office as fast as he can to get the alarm out for that crook who stole his uniform," she added to her brother.

"Darn it, Sis, I didn't think any guy'd fool you," Dan said, frowning.

"He didn't," she retorted. "Now get me a pail of water to clean up these dishes."

Charley Ryan went briskly towards the caretaker's quarters. "Can I use your phone?" he called through the door screen.

"Help yourself," a voice called back from the rear room. "It's right there by the door."

Ryan gave his number and went on talking in too low a tone to be overheard. "Are you Greg Witherspoon, sheriff of Fremont County?"

"Yep. Speaking," was the reply.

"I'm Charley Ryan, from the San Luis Valley. I'm over here at the show grounds."

"I know you, Ryan. What's on your mind?"

"There's a fellow holed up here that was being searched for at the bridge road block this morning."

"Nicola! You sure?"

"We-ell, I ain't swearing to it, but he's a plenty suspicious character and had ought to be looked into pretty pronto, I'd say. But better not broadcast it."

"You telling me?" the voice rasped. "I don't want two thirds of the town running over there. You keep your mouth shut, too."

"Be watching for you," Ryan said.

BONNIE had hastily cleaned and put away the breakfast dishes. She was closing the car trunk when she glimpsed the straw-hatted man again. He'd passed the trailer unnoticed and was going slowly along the horse stalls, looking in with apparent interest at each animal.

"I wish I could see under that hat!" she said.

"You crazy! What for?" Dan exclaimed. "I don't hafta see that shrimp's head to know he don't amount to nothing."

"He reminds me of somebody." Bonnie scowled thoughtfully. "I feel as if I should remember. Look how he walks, slow but as if he's strung on steel wire."

Dan merely grunted and moved away in the direction previously taken by his father. Bonnie's gaze followed the straw hat.

Impatience for her father's delay drew her attention in the other direction for a moment. When she looked back, the smallish man had vanished. He must have gone on down the road, she thought, yet that explanation didn't quite satisfy her. . . .

Jim Boland had remained out of sight in the far end stall. Only a narrow entrance passage had been left, but the hay bales were stacked irregularly inside and a couple of them, flat on the floor, looked as if somebody might have used them for a bed.

Jim seated himself there. The air was a little close inside, weighted with tiny dust particles, but if he stayed in the doorway somebody might come along and start talking. Better not mix with anybody until Bonnie carried out her plan. After she'd been so kind to him, he couldn't disregard her wishes, especially when they were so reasonable.

The outer side of the stall was solid wall except for one spot where a board had been split and an irregular piece knocked out, leaving an opening the width of the timber and something more in length. Horse probably kicked it out, Jim thought indifferently as he continued to examine his quarters.

Presently he thought he heard steps close outside. But a glance around the stacked hay showed no one. He was taking off one of the loose sports shoes to shake gravel from it when light sounds drew his attention. The line of stalls ended on a slope that extended down to a winding road back into the hills. Jim had noticed a corral with an open gate, and yes, there'd been a cow or two. They were probably drifting around on the hillside.

He was stooping to retie his shoe when a hot streak seared his left upper arm and a gun cracked not far from his ear. As the quick followup shot whizzed towards him, he dropped to the floor. He heard the thump of a bullet in wood. He lay there, forcing himself to hold his breath.

The shot had come through the hole in the wall. There was no shelter for him. The gunman must believe he'd got his victim. But the man wouldn't linger, the explosions would attract attention. He'd get out quick. These thoughts were instantaneous flashes. They mixed with a girl's scream.

Then he was on his feet, leaping for the open. A wire caught his toe. He sprawled into the roadway, knocking a coiled rope from the top of the up-ended hay bale at the entrance. Scrambling up, he whirled, catching a flash of blue as Bonnie raced towards him. Then he darted around the end of the stall building.

The slope was there, and the two cows moving off at a good pace as though they'd been frightened. A smallish man in brown clothes and a wide rimmed straw hat was going down the grade to the road beside which stood a long, black car. A man had just closed the hood, as if the driver had halted there to look at his engine. Jim got it all with one glance.

As he grabbed up a piece of rock, a shout came from the car, the man on the slope increased his speed and Bonnie screamed, "Wait! You can't catch him and they'll shoot!"

SHE WAS beside him with a bound, the coiled rope in her hands. Before he realized her intention, she had the loop whirling above her head. It shot out and down. The man's legs were going like pistons now, faster, faster.

It seemed as if the loop hung in mid-air. Then it settled over the man's body, tightened around his thighs with a jerk that yanked him from his feet.

Jim had grabbed the rope below Bonnie's hands. "Catch the end around that cedar post," he panted as he started along the rope, gripping it tight and giving it hard jerks as his captive floundered to free himself.

The man was down, fighting the loop, battling to keep head and face from being battered against the stony ground. Hat off, his hair was white under the morning sun.

Hand over hand Jim went down the rope, giving it a pull each time he shifted his grip.

"Look out!" Bonnie shrieked.

The Albino had stopped fighting the rope. One arm was up to protect his head, the other hand gripped a gun.

"Drag him till he drops it!" Bonnie screamed.

Jim put everything he had into a yank that jerked the man in the loop a dozen feet farther up the hillside. Then he advanced, almost on a run, shifting hands as he went.

Blood was spurting from the gunman's nose over his pasty face from which the glassy eyes stared venomously up at Jim. The wiry hand gripping the gun turned the muzzle and pulled trigger as Jim crashed down on the wrist with his heel. The bullet dug into the hill.

Down in the road the black car was gaining speed. As Jim yelled, "Got him!" the car disappeared in a balloon of dust.

Jim picked up the gun and stuck it in his belt. Then he pulled the loop from the gunman's thighs up under his arms, grasped the rope firmly and hauled him up to the level ground in front of the stalls, feet dragging.

The three Ryans stood together, Charley's arm about his daughter's shoulders. Everyone on the show grounds had been drawn by the shots and Bonnie's shrieks. They crowded close, exclaiming with amazement as they glimpsed Jim's prisoner.

"That's one of the crooks that played cop!" Bonnie cried.

"I hope he was only playing cop," Ryan said seriously. He gave Jim a sharp scrutiny. "You do look like a Westerner," he admitted, "and I'd hate to find out you're a crook. But I guess we'll let the sheriff settle it. He'd oughta be along right soon. Yes, I called Witherspoon." He looked straight at Bonnie. "You'd mixed into this business enough. I can't see why in blazes you didn't tell me right off!"

"No?" she said, her eyes twinkling up at him. . . .

Witherspoon listened with gravity to Jim Boland's account of events. Then to Bonnie's additions.

He turned back to Jim. "I sure like your looks better than this fellow's." He nodded toward the albino, who refused to talk.

"I've got money. I'll get me a mouthpiece," the albino said sullenly.

"You'll need one if the bullets in the stall wall fit your gun," Witherspoon said sharply.

"I think the pair in the black car got a good look at me when I was out on the hillside there," Jim said, "and they knew they'd been after the wrong man."

"Mebbeso," the sheriff granted. "At any rate, if they'd been the cops they said they were, they'd have stuck around. I'll have them picked up, and the redheaded woman, Vanna. Don't know how much can be done with any of that bunch. But she was accessory to your kidnaping and the robbery of your clothes, money and papers. I'll have the whole country alerted for Nicola. He won't get away!"

The albino's venom doubled when he discovered he'd been tricked into firing on the wrong man. But he derived a bitter amusement that the big shot Gumbo and his pal the Mink had been equally tricked. He opened up to the point of telling how the black car had been able to trail Jim. After most of the cars had left the wreck, they'd found a note in their car, telling them Nicola was in a horse trailer. They'd heard talk about the rodeo and headed for it.

It wasn't hard for Jim to guess who had written the note. Vanna, of course, still protecting her boy friend. She must have seen Jim crawl into the trailer.

WHEN THE sheriff had driven off with his prisoner, Ryan turned to Jim. "I'll betcha you wanta get out of them clothes," he said. "I'll stake you to some clean Levis and a shirt, till you can get your uniform. And we better do something about that bullet scrape on your arm."

"Thanks. I'll feel better when I go in town to make my official statement," Jim replied, "and thanks for offering to drive me."

When he emerged from the washroom a few minutes later, Bonnie gave him an approving look.

"It's the first time I've seen you with a clean face," she teased.

He started to say something, but the words tangled with his tongue. He was too close to her. And looking straight down into her eyes was too upsetting. Suddenly a long arm went around her, a hand cupped her chin and drew her lips to his. It was quite a long kiss.

"Oh!" she gasped, freeing herself. "Is that what you call surprise tactics?"

"No," he said with a happy grin, "just good old-fashioned, cowboy technique."

"We agreed on a—er—parley," she said.

"I've got just thirty days furlough, Bonnie, after that goodness knows where I'll be shipped."

"An awful lot can be said in thirty days," she suggested.

"It would be tough to spend it all—parleying," he replied, moving closer.

"We-ell, maybe it wouldn't be necessary to spend it all," she told him softly.

Jim moved closer again, venturing another of the dangerous looks deep into her eyes.

When I turned down that Five Grand I guess I knew the 'or else' would be a lot more wonderful."

Ryan's cheerful hail made whatever might have happened next a complete mystery. "Ready to go?" he called.

"Yes," Bonnie answered, "and I'm going along. I'm not practicing any new fancy stunts this morning. And I think I'll cut out the All Girl Rodeo, dad. It seems an awful waste of time!"

## KNOW YOUR WEST

*(Answers to the questions on page 45)*

1. Hind feet.

2. East.

3. To see some active, interesting cow ranch activity, such as bronc-busting, branding, dehorning, etc.

4. A dust storm.

5. Rain making—causing rain to fall by seeding clouds with crystals of silver iodide.

6. Kansas and Texas.

7. They are all the names of characters in old cowboy songs.

8. No. The off side is the right side, which is the wrong side to get off on.

9. On the dodge, on the lookout.

10. A running iron makes a brand by writing or "running" it on a critter's hide. A stamp iron stamps or prints the entire brand with a single impress. Dotting irons, little used nowadays, were sets of shaped irons in three or more separate parts from which brands could be built. Often they consisted of a bar, a small half circle and a large half circle or perhaps a quarter circle. A B, for instance, could be made by one impress of the bar and two of the small half circle.

# OUT OF THE CHUTES

IF YOU EVER want to argue that roping is a young man's game, you can point out that when Clark McEntire won the 1950 Laramie, Wyo., steer-roping contest, he was 21, the youngest professional in the business, and he beat out the best of the old hands.

But on the other hand if you want to argue that savvy and experience can beat youth, you can point to *this* year's contest. A couple of guys named Everett (whose combined ages add up to 95 years and whose combined professional roping experience adds up to 43 years) were the stars of the show.

All of which proves exactly nothing—luckily, because if winners could be figured out on paper there wouldn't be any steer roping contests nor any bunkhouse arguments.

But there's one thing we can pretty nearly prove about this Laramie Show—besides all the thrills of roping it provides enough drama for several Hollywood movies.

If you were there last year, you'll never forget the look on the face of John McEntire (steer-roping champ, 1934) when his son was the winner. Clark McEntire was over $3,000 richer, but you couldn't help thinking that his dad's proud grin meant even more to him than the fat purse.

Coming in second last year was Carl Arnold, 18 seconds behind Clark in score and 31 years ahead of him in age. Carl had won the old-timers' calf-roping match (for men over 50) the day before, and of course he got a big kick from being runner-up in the steer match, beating out such comparative youngsters as Choate Webster, Everett Shaw and Ike Rude.

Sponsor of the contest is Rancher King Merritt, who cheerfully admits to 57 years, and in 1950 came in ninth in the field of 12. Early this winter King sent out a stirring challenge. He and Bill Wilkinson claimed that there were no two men, 50 or older, who could outrope them on five calves and five steers. The only provision besides age was that the two men must both come from the same state—any of the 48 except Wyoming, which Merritt and Wilkinson were representing.

Carl Arnold naturally was eager to take up the challenge. And he didn't have to look far around his native state of Arizona to find a partner. Everett Bowman, now 52, one of the greatest ropers of rodeo history, lives in Wickenburg. The only problem was whether he could be persuaded to come out of a seven-year retirement. Bowman came out with a bound.

He proved, too, that seven years away from the arena hadn't deprived him of his skill. He and Arnold beat the challengers, both on the calves and the steers, and his performance made several of the younger ropers very grateful that Bowman is not planning to un-retire permanently.

THE OTHER Everett who covered himself with glory was the one named Shaw. No youngster himself—he's 43—he tied his five steers in a total time of 137.9 seconds and won $3,214.94.

Runner-up Cotton Lee's time was 140.2, and the three seconds difference made nearly a thousand dollars difference in cash. But still, $2,411.21 isn't bad for an afternoon's work.

Ike Rude came in third and John (Wild Man) Scott was fourth.

Choate Webster, who was Laramie's Steer-Roping Champion in 1948 and 1949, was far off the pace this year. However, he had some compensation, because he won $1,000 for the fastest time on a single steer, 14.4, which was also a new world's record.

In between the go-rounds in the 1950

contest, a pretty, dark-haired girl of 19 rode into the ring on a famous old mount. The girl was King Merritt's youngest daughter, Ramona; the horse was Bob Crosby's Powderhorn, and of course the pair got a big hand as Ramona roped and tied a tough old steer in 60.4 seconds.

What the audience didn't know was that Ramona didn't feel well that Sunday. Being a trouper she went on as scheduled, however, but on the following Wednesday, she was hospitalized with polio.

You can imagine the cheers of the crowd when Ramona trotted into the ring on Powderhorn this year. You can guess the feelings of her mother, watching from the grandstand. And you can picture her dad's face as he laned out her steer.

Ramona was one of the lucky ones. She recovered from the disease almost as good as new. Her left arm is still a little weak, "but," she said with a grin, "it's my right one I use for roping."

All in all it was quite a day for steer-roping fans, all 11,000 of them.

And it was quite a steer-ropers' reunion. There was hardly a conversation that didn't begin: "Do you remember the time . . ."

EVERETT BOWMAN is a big, modest guy— 6'2", over 200 pounds—who is much more likely to recollect his flops than his triumphs. You won't hear a word from him about being All-Around Champion in 1935 and 1937, nor about being runner-up the next three years. He might mention the Pendleton Round-Up, but he's not apt to mention that he's one of four men who ever won two legs on the Sam Jackson Trophy. Of course, there wasn't much point in bragging about that anyway, since two of the other two-time winners, Ike Rude and Everett Shaw, were also at Laramie.

Bowman was born in Hope, N. Mex., on July 12, 1899, to a family who ran horses because they liked to and a grocery store because they liked to eat.

He entered his first contest in 1921, collecting a small lump of prize money and a big bump of rodeo ambition.

His first big rodeo was at Ely, Nev., in 1925. If Bowman won anything at that show you'll never find out about it from him. "About the only thing I can remember about that show was the cold. The cowboys built fires back of the chutes, and they'd only leave them long enough to ride a bronc or rope a calf."

Bowman tried all the rodeo events, but he found out he did better by specializing, as so many other cowboys have discovered. Bronc- and bull-riding weren't for him. One time he entered the Brahma bull-riding in Los Angeles. "I got up on four bulls in the chute," he says "and then I got up off the ground four times. That was enough bull-riding for me."

After that Bowman stuck to roping and bulldogging. People think of him mainly as a roper, but he won bulldogging championships—in 1930, '33, '35 and '37—as often as he won national roping titles. He was the first champion calf-roper ever named, (1929) and repeated in '35 and '37. In 1937 he also won the steer-roping.

Although it was the challenge of a roping match that brought him out of retirement, Bowman didn't go in for matches much during his rodeo career. He remembers one, though, against Hugh Bennett at Tucson in 1933.

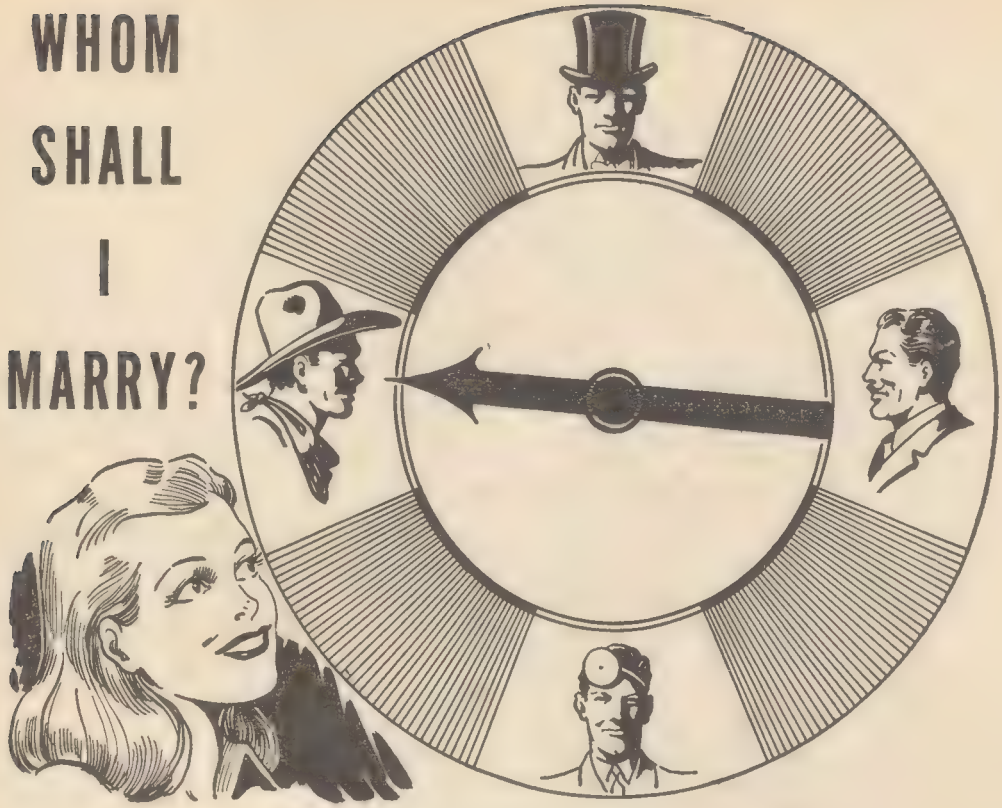
"To my way of thinking," he says, "it was more of an endurance contest. We each roped and tied one big yearling calf. Hugh made a real fast catch, and I thought sure I was licked, but then he had an awful lot of trouble tying. I figured the best thing to do was chase my animal around the arena for a while. Maybe it would get worn out. Finally I roped it, and then I got off my horse and grabbed the calf's off fore-leg and threw it pretty quick. My time was 50 seconds or so, as I recall it, but even at that I beat Hugh."

Bowman is now working for the Arizona Sheriff's Office. He ran for sheriff of Maricopa County twice, but was defeated in close races.

Everett Bowman, however, is a fellow who is used to winning close races, and if he really wants to be sheriff of Maricopa County, we wouldn't bet against him.

*Adios,* THE EDITORS

# WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



*By Professor Marcus Mari*

***Man of Scorpio*** ***Oct. 24—Nov. 22***

CARNEGIE, Martin Luther, Teddy Roosevelt, Roland Young, Pat O'Brien, Tommy Dorsey, H. G. Wells, Voltaire, Stevenson, Admiral Byrd, Will Rogers, Dick Powell and Roy Rogers are all Scorpions.

This, an exceptionally powerful zodiacal sign, produces the most likeable of men. Should their weak traits overrule their strength and they become problems to those who love them, they will still retain their warm, human charm—even to their enemies. It's hard to dislike a Scorpio man; he is so ever ready to give you his heart, his wit and his purse. He doesn't have any selfishness about him. This, plus his quick charm, his affability and his generosity, make him one of the pets of the zodiacal heavens. Women love him, men envy him, and his gay exuberance makes fortune smile upon him. He has enormous vitality, so much that he should be careful not to wear himself out. Only one thing can crush him, and that is if he sets his aim too high and disappoints himself. He expects great things from his wit and ability, and will not take defeat easily.

His mate should be rather easy-going, kind and generous in disposition, warm-hearted and affectionate. He does not want a housekeeper for a wife; he wants a mate who will laugh and play as he wants to. Despite being highly emotional, the Scorpio man won't cling to a family just because it is his. If he's unhappy, he tries to change his life. But companionship, laughter, love and a spirit like his will hold him forever.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari, care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

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# Winchester Rim

*By Leslie Ernenwein*

**THE STORY SO FAR:**

Famous law gun CLAY PAYETTE is forced by a debt of friendship to GENERAL JOE SHAFTER to return to his one-time home, Tortilito, and hire on as gunguard for JACK FARGO'S Freight & Stage Line. Shafter wants Clay to find out if Fargo is responsible for the sabotage on Texas-Western Railroad. In Tortilito, BLACKY SMITH comes to see Clay, says he too is a spy for Texas-Western. Clay goes on an advance scout to the divide, where he's to meet DANNY BUKANE—driver of a big Fargo ore shipment. Eve, Fargo's lovely daughter, rides up there, tells Clay she once loved him. Later, Clay hears the ore wagon approaching, then a gun-blast. Danny is sprawled out by the wagon box, and Blacky Smith confronts Clay. Just as Clay manages to get the man's gun, a voice behind him announces, "I've got you covered. Payette!"

**CONCLUSION**

A SIGHING curse slipped from Payette's lips. That voice sounded vaguely familiar, yet he couldn't identify it. Was the man behind him one of Texas-Western's gunguards?

Perhaps there'd be a chance to whirl and outshoot him. . . .

Payette saw a smile crease Blacky Smith's cheeks as the dark-faced rider peered past him and exclaimed, "You cut it awful thin, Riley!"

Even then, knowing why the voice had sounded familiar, Payette couldn't believe it was Riley Cleek behind him. Bootjack's ramrod wouldn't protect a railroad dry-gulcher who'd shot Danny Bukane and stopped an all-important ore shipment. Not with his boss being part owner of Fargo Freight. There must be some mistake.

All this in the moment before Cleek called, "Why don't you make a try with them guns, Payette?"

That rank-voiced question, and the way Smith stepped from the line of fire, told Payette there was no mistake. Riley Cleek wanted him to make a play. The Bootjack foreman was looking for an excuse to shoot him down!

Still not understanding it, Payette dropped the Spencer and the gun he'd taken from Smith. Then, keeping his right hand well away from holster, he turned and had his look at the sour-faced man who stood twenty feet north of him with a cocked revolver in his hand.

"I thought you was real tough," Cleek scoffed, plainly disappointed. "So tough you'd never quit when you had a gun in both hands."

Payette shrugged, asked, "What you doing here, Riley?"

"I'm dehorning a railroad spy," Cleek announced and motioned for Smith to take Payette's holster gun.

How, Payette wondered, had Riley found out that he was a spy. Had Smith informed on him? Was Blacky playing a doublecross on General Joe Shafter?

But that didn't fit, for the pock-marked gun hawk had just stopped Fargo's ore wagon.

"Go git his horse," Cleek ordered, and as Smith scrambled over the rock outcrop, Philbin's foreman asked slyly, "Got it figgered out, Pronto?"

Payette shook his head. "Doesn't seem to make sense," he muttered.

"It'll make plenty of sense to Jack Fargo when he hears how you rode with General Joe Shafter during the war," Cleek bragged.

So that was it. Someone had found out about him serving with Shafter in the cavalry—someone smart enough to guess why he had come back to Tortilito.

"And it'll make sense when Fargo hears how I caught you dead to rights with a carbine in your hands just after the ore wagon was shot at," Cleek bragged.

Payette peered at him squinty-eyed, demanding, "You don't think I shot at that wagon, do you?"

Cleek shrugged. "It ain't what I think that's important. It's what Jack Fargo and Henry Wallack and all them others think."

A thin, sardonic smile slanted Cleek's craggy cheeks as he added, "Mebbe you'd of done better making a play agin me when you had the chance, Payette. That Citizens' Committee might decide to lynch you, smack-dab. Or Bukane's Mex sweetheart may stick a knife into you right on Main Street before we get you into a cell. She ain't going to like what happened to her Danny boy."

When Smith brought up the horses, Cleek tossed him a pigging-string and ordered, "Tie the spy's hands good and tight."

Blacky was enjoying this. "The great Payette," he gloated, grasping Payette's hands from behind while Cleek kept his gun aimed. "The one that killed Kid Cantrell and stomped Lon Peigan."

BLACKY drew the wrists tight and then hit Payette a hard blow above the kidneys. When Payette grunted, Smith struck him a second time and cackled, "Grunt again, Pronto, grunt again!"

Riley Cleek loosed a mirthless chuckle. "Don't abuse the poor feller," he cautioned. "Pronto ain't used to it."

Holstering his gun, Cleek untastened his catch-rope and said, "Boost him onto his horse."

When that was done the Bootjack foreman threw a loop that settled around Payette's throat. He drew it snug, squinted at

Payette in appraising fashion and said, "You don't look natural without a gun in your holster. You look almost naked."

He nodded at the two weapons on the ground. When Smith had put the pistol in holster and the carbine in saddle scabbard, Cleek said, "That looks more natural. Now lead out, Blacky, the back trail towards town."

And presently, as the three horses picked their way over the rimrock, Cleek taunted, "You'll look real pretty, Payette, riding down Main Street with a rope around your neck."

Payette shrugged. He wondered how Cleek intended to explain Smith's presence on the divide. But that wasn't important either. With Danny Bukane dead, and his own sneaking mission revealed, nothing seemed important to Clay.

Later, when they reached the flats and Cleek said, "I'll take him in alone," Payette understood that Smith's presence wouldn't have to be explained. Cleek could say he'd been riding the rimrock looking for strays and had been attracted by the shooting.

Simple, Payette thought dismally. So simple it would be entirely convincing. And the truth was too complicated for comprehension. Who would believe a spy? Nothing he might say would sound logical or reasonable. Nobody would believe that Junior Philbin's foreman was mixed up in a deal to wreck Fargo Freight.

Payette could scarcely believe it himself. What was behind it? What possible reason could Philbin have to ruin Snapper Jack Fargo? Recalling Eve's words about the forfeit, Payette cursed dismally. Her father wasn't the only one who'd pay a forfeit for this day's double-crossing. Danny Bukane had paid the highest forfeit of all, and a hog-tied spy might soon keep him company.

SNAPPER JACK FARGO was supervising the repair of a freight wagon when Junior Philbin rushed into the wagonyard. Mildly surprised at Junior's unaccustomed hurrying, Fargo asked, "Where's the fire at?"

"Fire, hell!" Philbin announced, hugely excited, "Riley Cleek just rode in—says Bukane got shot on the divide, along with three or four mules!"

Fargo stared at him in bug-eyed astonishment. "Danny shot?" he asked dazedly. "How about Payette?"

"Riley brought him in with a rope around his neck. He's turning him over to Sol Biddle at the jail."

"What the hell you talking about?" Fargo demanded.

"I'm telling you that Payette is under arrest for killing Danny Bukane. Riley says he was up on the divide about noon looking for strays. He heard shooting near Pyramid Pass. When he got there he found Payette with a carbine in his hands and threw down on him."

Fargo shook his head. "Clay wouldn't of done a thing like that," he insisted. "Clay was guarding Danny's outfit, you fool."

"Guarding, hell!" Philbin scoffed. "He's a Texas-Western spy, sent here to do just what he did."

"You're loco!" Fargo shouted. "By God you must be drunk!"

Philbin smiled and said, "I heard something an hour ago that will make it all look different to you, Jack. I heard that Clay Payette served as a captain of cavalry under General Joe Shafter all through the war, that they were real close friends besides."

"Who told you that?"

"Music Mike Tannenbaum, who spent some time in a Confederate hospital with Payette. He says Shafter came to visit Payette several times, that they were friends in Texas before the war."

Fargo stared at Philbin, shocked speechless by the import of his words. He leaned against the freight wagon as if burdened by a weight that was too heavy for his old legs.

"You sure made a bad mistake hiring Payette," Philbin went on. Then he added sympathetically, "But who'd of thought he was a Texas-Western spy."

"The dirty dog," Fargo muttered. "The dirty sneaking dog."

His age-veined right hand doubled into

a fist. He pounded it against the palm of his left hand and said in an outraged voice, "The double-crossing son deserves hanging!"

"That's what I think," Philbin agreed. "And there's others out on Main Street thinking the same thing . . . ."

News of the Winchester Rim ambush spread like wildfire. By sundown, when Sheriff Sol Biddle toted a supper tray to the jail, Main Street was crowded with a motley assemblage of townsmen, ranchers and miners from Silver Creek.

Wild rumors had been circulated, exaggerated accounts whereby Pronto Payette was said to have cut Danny Bukane's throat from ear to ear before slaughtering all the mules, and that he had used the same big knife he'd held against Lon Peigan's back in the cafe. There was a rumor that Eve Fargo, returning from Curvo Camp, had brought Bukane to Juanita's home and that Doc Eyfe was there now, examining the body.

"We're going to lynch that butcher!" a man shouted at Biddle.

And another promised, "You won't have to tote him no breakfast, Sol. He won't need it."

HENRY WALLACK, having spent considerable time composing what he called a "Declaration of Decision," now stood on the hotel veranda and read it in ringing tones to the crowd.

Sol Biddle paused on the courthouse stoop long enough to hear the first shouted line: "This latest outrage could have been prevented if our elected law enforcement officer had arrested Pronto Payette yesterday, but . . . ."

Biddle went on into his office, not wanting to hear more. When he pushed the tray beneath the metal gate of Payette's cell, he muttered, "Wallack is out there giving a big speech that'll stir up a lynch mob sure as hell."

Payette picked up the tray and placed it on the iron-slatted bunk. Then he turned and asked, "Do you believe I'd kill Danny Bukane?"

"Well, it don't seem sensible, after what you done for him the other day," Biddle admitted, wiping his perspiring face. "But Jack Fargo is convinced you was sent here by Texas-Western to find out about the ore shipments and stop 'em."

Then he asked, "Was you, Clay?"

That was a question Payette didn't choose to answer. Instead he said, "Blacky Smith did the shooting. I saw him do it and had a gun on him when Cleek threw down on me from behind."

"Riley tells it different," Biddle insisted obstinately. "He never mentioned Blacky Smith, and I don't see why he should lie about it, being Junior Philbin's ramrod and all."

Payette shrugged, realizing how useless talk would be in the face of Cleek's lying testimony.

"If there was some way you could prove you didn't do the shooting," Biddle suggested half-heartedly.

"How the hell could I prove a thing like that?" Payette demanded.

Then an abrupt thought came to him and he asked, "Have you got my carbine and pistol out there in your office?"

Biddle nodded, whereupon Payette said with swift urgency, "Look at the loads, Sol, and into the barrels. Those guns weren't fired today!"

"You mean they're full loaded, and clean?" Biddle asked doubtingly.

"Look at them," Payette said, "and see for yourself."

Because there was a swift-rising flame of hope in him, Payette's knuckles showed white as he gripped the cell bars. Watching Biddle move along the dusk-hazed corridor, he called, "Bring the pistol back with you, Sol."

"What for?" the sheriff asked.

"I'll explain when you bring it," Payette promised.

And then he stood there, gripping the bars with a mounting impatience as he waited. Sol Biddle might believe him, might be convinced that he was innocent. Even though the truth didn't seem reasonable, those loaded, clean-barreled guns might be the proof he needed.

Sol Biddle wasn't the type of sheriff who

would relish guarding an innocent prisoner against a lynch mob. Still, hope was a high white flame in Clay Payette now. Even though Eve Fargo would never forgive him for being a railroad spy, he might have his chance to avenge Danny's shooting.

A faint glow of lamplight shone along the corridor as Biddle lit a lamp in the office. Payette waited, visualizing what was taking place out there. Sol would examine the loads, then hold each gun against the lamp and peer down its barrel.

Payette was sure about the pistol, having cleaned it last night. But there was no telling about the carbine Fargo had furnished him. Yet even though its barrel wasn't clean, Biddle would find it fully loaded.

Payette took out his Durham sack and was fashioning a cigarete when Biddle came back along the corridor.

"Both barrels clean as a hound's tooth," the sheriff reported. "That means you didn't fire at Bukane. But why the hell would Cleek say you did?"

"Damned if I can figure it out either," Payette admitted. And now, observing the pistol Sol toted, he tossed away the unlit cigarette. He had something more important than smoking to do now. He had to talk Sol Biddle into turning him loose with that gun!

IT WOULD take some doing, for Sol was a man who habitually shied away from important decisions. What, Sol insisted, would folks think—him turning loose a man who'd been arrested for murder? Law-abiding folks like Effie Mae Isham, for instance—

"You've got proof I didn't fire a shot," Payette pointed out. "Not a single, solitary shot."

"But that's for a jury to decide, not me," Biddle objected.

Payette laughed mirthlessly. "Do you call that mob out there a jury? They'll shoot us both down if you try to protect me."

"Shouldn't wonder," Biddle muttered worriedly.

Payette waited, wanting this apprehensive badgetoter to worry. Perhaps if Sol fretted enough he might turn him loose.

Biddle wiped his pudgy face on a shirt sleeve. He glanced toward the office doorway as if fearful the mob might appear at any moment.

"It's a sorry mess," he muttered. "But I can't turn you loose. I'd never hear the last of it, especially from Doc Fyfe."

Payette swore softly, understanding that he had lost. It seemed ironic that the sheriff's romantic notions toward an old maid should be the thing that stood between him and freedom.

The sound of footsteps in the office jerked them both alert. Biddle whirled and was fearfully facing the doorway when Doctor Fyfe came into the corridor.

"Ah, there you are, my shiftless laggard of the law," he greeted. "Gossiping with a gunman when you should be out corralling a criminal."

"What in hell you talking about?" Biddle demanded, swift resentment replacing his apprehension.

"Business, of course. Important business. Danny Bukane says that a person called Blacky Smith is the culprit who shot him."

"Danny Bukane!" Sol blurted. "Ain't he dead?"

"To the contrary," Doc announced, "he is very much alive. Young Bukane sustained a cranium concussion that missed being a fatal wound by an infinitesimal margin. He is still in a state of partial shock, but insists that he saw said Smith shooting at him from the rimrock."

Clay Payette could scarcely believe it. He asked dazedly, "How did Danny get back to town?"

"Eve Fargo brought him in a buckboard," the medico reported. "She too, thought he was dead."

Payette loosed a gusty sigh. Peering through the bars at Biddle he said flatly, "Now you've got to turn me loose, Sol."

And as Biddle unlocked the cell gate, Fyfe mused smilingly, "I'll tell Effie Mae you won't be able to eat supper with us this evening."

"Why won't I?" Biddle demanded, bristling.

"Because you'll be busy searching for Blacky Smith and arresting him."

Doc chuckled and added, "Might be a considerable chore for a sheriff of your caliber."

Biddle wilted visibly. "It could wait," he suggested.

"Absolutely not," Fyfe insisted. "When the news gets around that Bukane has named his attacker, Smith will hightail out of town. Now is the time to nab him, while he's not expecting trouble."

"Mebbe he ain't in town," Biddle said hopefully.

But Fyfe announced, "I saw him on Main Street an hour ago."

Out of the cell now, Payette reached for his gun. Slipping it into holster he asked, "How'd you like to swear in a deputy to arrest Smith?"

"You mean—you?" Biddle asked in wide-eyed wonderment.

When Payette nodded, the sheriff exclaimed, "Hell yes, Clay! I got a badge in my desk drawer."

And as he hurried toward the office, Biddle called back, "I'll be eating supper with you and Effie Mae, Doc—the three of us like always!"

BLACKY SMITH came out of Mendoza's Cafe, glanced appraisingly at the crowd in front of the courthouse and then sauntered slowly along the plank walk. Crossing a side street he almost collided with Sheriff Biddle and Doc Fyfe. Stepping around them, it occurred to Blacky that they had probably left the jail by its rear door, using a back alley to avoid the crowd.

Smith went on to Corral Alley and followed it to the Big Top. Going inside he smiled at Linda Remington who sat at her blackjack table dealing cards to three cowboys. Then he walked up to the bar where Music Mike Tannenbaum stood talking with Lon Peigan.

"I just met Biddle coming out of a back alley on his way to supper," Blacky reported. "There's a big crowd in front of the jail."

"So?" Tannenbaum mused. Without looking at Peigan he said softly, "Go stir 'em up a trifle, Lon."

Peigan turned obediently, then swung around and asked Smith, "You reckon the jail's back door might be unlocked?"

Smith nodded. He glanced at Peigan's bandaged left hand, grinned and said slyly, "Put an extra slug into him for me."

They were like that, forming a loose triangle in front of the bar, when Clay Payette stepped into the saloon and said sharply, "I'm arresting you, Smith."

For a moment there was a continuing drone of conversation along the bar and the *clickety-clack* of a nearby roulette wheel. Then abruptly all sound ceased and all eyes focused on the tall, lean-shanked man who stood with his right hand hovering an inch above holster.

"What you doing loose?" Smith demanded in astonishment.

Payette said, "I'm arresting you for shooting Danny Bukane," and used his left hand to nudge back his jacket, revealing a deputy-sheriff badge pinned to his shirt pocket.

"That old Abilene badge is no good here," Tannenbaum announced. He glanced at Smith and Peigan in turn. Then a grotesque grin slanted his scar-rutted cheeks and he scoffed, "Your bluff won't work, Clay."

Smith and Peigan clawed for their guns as a team. But Payette, guessing the significance of Tannenbaum's sly glance, was firing before their weapons cleared leather. His first slug caught Smith in the right side, whirling him off balance so that he floundered against Tannenbaum. The second shot, following so closely that the two explosions merged, knocked Peigan down.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the thunderous fragment of room-trapped sound ended and there was strict silence again.

Peering through a wavering blue ribbon of gunsmoke, Payette saw Tannenbaum push Smith away from him, heard Music Mike exclaim, "Don't shoot, Clay, I'm out of it!"

As the big saloonman raised his palms shoulder high, Payette glanced at Smith

who leaned against the bar clutching his right side with both hands. Blacky's pock-marked face was ashen grey now and he whimpered, "Somebody go git Doc Fyfe quick—before I bleed to death."

Payette stepped over to where Lon Peigan lay with his gun clutched in a rigid right hand. Not sure that Peigan was dead, Payette kicked the weapon out of his hand. Then he looked at Smith and said rankly, "Start talking. Who hired you to ambush that ore wagon?"

"Can't you see I'm bad hurt?" Blacky whined. "This ain't no time to pester a man."

"You'll talk, if I have to beat it out of you," Payette promised and moved forward, raising his gun.

Smith's glance darted to Tannenbaum as if seeking help. He gawked at Clay's upswung gun, cringed back along the bar and whimpered, "All right. I was hired by—"

But Linda Remington's shrill voice cut the man short. "Clay, look out!" she screamed.

TANNENBAUM'S first bullet missed Payette by inches. The second one raked his right cheek but it didn't spoil the accuracy of Payette's deliberately aimed shot. Clay saw the gun drop from Music Mike's splayed fingers. He watched the big man's body go altogether limp, and wondered what had made Tannenbaum miss his first shot by so wide a margin.

Then, as Music Smith slumped into the sawdust, Payette shifted his glance to Smith—and understood that Tannenbaum's first bullet had been fired at Blacky who lay spraddled out in front of the bar.

Tannenbaum propped himself on an elbow. He said weakly, "Bring me a drink."

Linda Remington hurried over, knelt beside him and said soberly, "I'm sorry, Mike, terribly sorry."

The saloon tent was filled with a crowd of inquisitive men who formed a ring. One of them pointed to Tannenbaum's blood-smeared shirt and said ominously, "Gut shot!"

[*Turn page*]


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Payette brought a glass of whisky from the bar and handed it to Tannenbaum.

"Thanks," the saloonman said, and gulped it down. Then he peered up at Payette and said slowly, "Had a hunch you'd spoil my game. That's why I tried to scare you off."

Payette understood now why both Joe Shafter and Snapper Jack Fargo had been so bitter in their accusation of the other. He didn't have to be told Tannenbaum's game. He'd been playing for big stakes, to bankrupt Texas-Western and then take it over, along with Fargo Freight.

Recalling Linda's reluctant warning, Payette understood that she had guessed how the feud was rigged. And except for her second warning here a few moments ago, he would not have lived to understand the first one.

A prolonged spasm of coughing racked Tannenbaum. Bloody froth stained his lips when he said sighingly, "It was a good gamble, but I lost."

Sheriff Biddle elbowed his way through the ring of silent spectators, closely followed by Doctor Fyfe. Sol peered at the three fallen men and blurted, "God A'mighty!"

When Fyfe knelt down to examine Tannenbaum's wound, the saloonman said, "No use, Doc." He looked up at Payette and asked, "Did I finish off Blacky Smith?"

Payette nodded, whereupon the grotesque grin briefly rutted Music Mike's scarred cheeks and he said, "I should've shot you first and him second—but I wanted to shut his gabby mouth."

"Who else was in the deal with you?" Payette asked.

Tannenbaum coughed again. For a moment he seemed to be choking to death. Then, fighting for breath between each word, he said, "Peigan—Smith—Cleek."

His lips loosened into a cynical smile. "They split—the stage holdup loot," he continued, his voice fading to a whisper.

He went into another spasm of coughing that ended in a wheezing groan. The bartender brought a glass of whisky but Doc Fyfe motioned him away.

"He's dead," the medico announced, his voice sounding harsh above Linda Remington's low sobbing.

PAYETTE took the glass of whisky from the bartender, drained it and returned the empty glass. Then he walked to the doorway and was going through it when Junior Philbin and Snapper Jack Fargo came hurriedly into the wide circle of entrance lamplight.

Philbin stopped instantly and demanded, "Who turned you loose?"

"Sheriff Biddle," Payette said, his voice deceptively mild in comparison to the swift-flaring eagerness in him.

"Why?"

"To tell you something," Payette said, drawing his gun and aiming it at Philbin's belt buckle.

Fargo had pulled up beside Philbin. Now he stepped hastily away and exclaimed, "We know it wasn't you that shot Danny."

Payette ignored him. Scowling at Philbin he said rankly, "Take off that ring before I give you a slug in the gut."

"What for?"

Instead of answering, Payette cocked his gun. That action convinced Junior Philbin. He wet the finger joint between his lips, tugged the ring off and asked, "Now what?"

"This," Payette muttered, holstering his gun and pitching forward with a swiftness that caught Philbin flat-footed. He hit Junior in the belly with a right fist and raked his face with the knuckles of a vicious left.

Philbin grunted a curse. He back-tracked hastily, his boots scuffing up a haze of lamplit dust. When Payette charged again, Junior pivoted for a flank attack, but Payette was too quick for him. Ducking Junior's hard-swung right he slammed a blow to Philbin's head. Clay was remotely aware of faces roundabout, of a voice that chanted, "Clinch, Junior, clinch."

But Junior wasn't clinching. He was swinging with both fists. Wildly cursing, he lunged into Payette with all the solid massiveness of his big frame behind the punches. Payette blocked a barrage of

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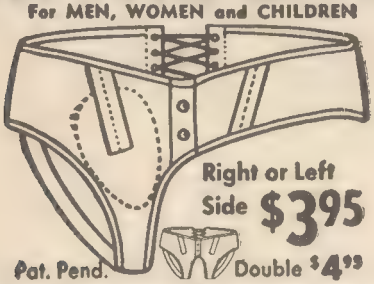

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blows. He swung and missed, and felt the stinging rake of knuckles across his down-tilted forehead.

But there was no flesh-slashing ring on that fist now, no blood to blind him. Ducking low, he swiveled around Philbin. He caught Junior off balance, slugged him with both fists and was mildly astonished to see him go down.

Peering through the boot-churned dust haze, Payette growled, "Get up, Junior, get up!"

Philbin got to one knee. He shook his head and wiped his bleeding nose on an up-hunched shoulder. Payette stood motionless until Junior was on his feet, until the big man came at him shouting, "Damn you!" in a rage-clotted voice.

Payette dodged a fist that barely missed his jaw. He caught Philbin with a sledging right to the face and followed it with a left that jerked Junior's head around. Seeing the dazed expression that came into Philbin's eyes now, Payette reached out and grasped the big man's shirt, kept him on his feet.

"Not yet, Junior," Payette muttered.

Then, with pure savagery glinting his lamplit eyes, Payette slugged Philbin under the left ear and let him fall.

A great sigh came from the roundabout crowd. Sheriff Biddle said sternly, "Break it up, gents, give the man some air."

And now Payette saw Riley Cleek step forward as if to aid his fallen boss. Bootjack's foreman, Payette thought instantly, didn't know he'd been named as an accomplice by Tannenbaum.

Drawing his gun, Payette ordered sharply, "Hoist your hands, Cleek!"

"What for?" Cleek demanded, staring at Clay in loose-lipped wonderment.

"So Sheriff Biddle can arrest you," Payette said. Not shifting his gaze from Philbin's ramrod, Payette said to Biddle, "Take his gun, Sol."

AFTERWARD, as Payette elbowed his way through the crowd, a man said admiringly, "You sure whupped Junior good!"

And Snapper Jack Fargo came alongside to ask, "Did Joe Shafter send you here, Clay?"

"What difference does it make?" Payette muttered and went on along the dark alley.

Nothing Payette reflected, made much difference now. The debt that had brought him here was paid. He could ride out of this town tonight, and he would!

Payette walked along the deserted street to Benton's Livery. He wondered about Linda Remington, who'd looked so forlorn, sobbing beside Music Mike. She probably blamed herself for his death. Yet she had thought enough of Philbin to accuse Tannenbaum of taking unfair advantage of Junior. She was, Payette thought, the type of woman who would help any man she liked, regardless of whether he was right or wrong.

Payette shrugged. A man was a damned fool to fret himself trying to understand women.

He was leading his horse from its stall when Eve Fargo came into the barn's lantern-lit doorway and asked, "Are you leaving—tonight?"

"Yes," Payette said, knowing what she would ask him, and understanding what his answer would mean to her.

"I guess you know what Danny told us about the shooting," Eve offered, "and what Junior said about you being a railroad spy."

Payette nodded. He hoisted his saddle to the sorrel's back and reached under for the cinch.

"Is it true—what Junior said?" she asked.

Payette nodded again, not looking at her until the latigo strap was tied. Then he asked gruffly, "That all you wanted to know?"

"One more question, Clay. What sort of debt did you owe General Shafter?"

"The biggest debt a man could owe," Payette said. "He saved my life."

He led the horse past her and was in the point of mounting when Eve came up

[*Turn page*]

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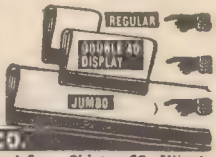


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to him quickly. "I knew it," she said, an odd happiness in her voice. "I just knew it!"

"Knew what?"

"That you were forced into being a spy."

Payette stared at her. "How could you know that?" he demanded.

"Because I know you," Eve said.

Her lips were softly smiling now, and she asked teasingly, "Remember what you said up on the divide?"

Payette remembered. But even so, he wasn't sure, until she whispered, "You said—any time, any place."

Payette grinned. He dropped the sorrel's reins and reached out for her, and turned so that her smiling face was fully revealed in the lantern light. "How about Junior Philbin?" he asked.

Eve wrinkled her nose at him. She said, "Linda Remington can have him all to herself, just so I have all of you."

And her lips, so sweetly smiling as he kissed them, told Clay Payette how much she wanted him.

*The End*


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